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## BOX OFFICE

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# BOX OFFICE

BY

JOHN ANDERSON

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JONATHAN CAPE AND HARRISON SMITH

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## INTRODUCTION

### OUT FRONT

**A**LTHOUGH drama may outlast all theatres and survive imperishably apart from its physical limits, it happens now, as it has always happened, to be conditioned by the place in which it lives. It takes on the tone and color of its surroundings and reflects them as the theatre itself, in its aspects of social institution, ultimately adjusts itself to the temper of the people who use it.

Thus there are plainly evident national, not to say perhaps racial, clues to the state of the theatre in any place. It takes on slightly varying values in different countries, occupies a subtly different position in their lives as compared to its position in the lives of, let us say, people of equal intelligence and interest in another country. There is a risk of glibness in offering superficial evidence but there are real, though difficult, distinctions to be found by sitting in and feeling audiences in England and in America, or in Italy, France and Germany. Perhaps it is older tradition, more spacious ways of living, or the attitude of genial frankness toward simple playthings with which the Italians seem able to take their theatre, not their drama, as a social institution and part of their lives that accounts for their support of the theatre. Perhaps these are deceptive clues. I am not sure.

Not to wheedle the point past endurance, I conclude from gathering the material for this survey that the alleged American genius for business has had a permeating influence upon the

American theatre. It is widely looked upon as a business, accepted as a business by the people who manipulate it and the people who patronize it. In the ensuing sketches I have attempted to examine some of the phases of its business dealings, since it may be important, at the moment when our drama appears to be reaching some coherent national expression, to understand precisely the physical and financial handicaps under which our whole theatre exists.

For something is wrong with the theatre.

This, I am well aware, is not news. It is one of the most ancient virtues of the theatre and one of its greatest sources of strength that something is always wrong with it and that it always survives. The important and baffling thing in its present situation is, however, that more things than usual seem to be out of gear at the same time.

In the past it has proved at various times unsatisfactory to small groups. Now many groups are dissatisfied. When producers, authors and critics are dissatisfied with the theatre an artistic change is likely to ensue. When actors are not pleased economic changes are likely. When audiences are dissatisfied all of the other factors may be affected.

In the present instance it seems to me that the theatre is suffering from a purely economic situation. It is possible, I think, to separate the present highly organized theatre into three elements. It is at once an artistic, a social and an economic institution.

In the greatest periods of the English theatre it was so constituted that these three parts were held firmly and inescapably together. Under royal patronage it was securely entrenched on all three sides of what must be, for the sake of balance, an equilateral triangle. No one who cherishes the great tradition of the English drama could doubt for an instant that its blissful



situation in these great periods was due solely to the genius of its dramatists.

It would be possible, perhaps, to demonstrate that the theatre, for all the splendid traditions actors stamp on it, is never greater than its dramatists, and that the other elements in its make-up depend exclusively upon that essential condition.

But when the theatre emerged toward the end of the Victorian era from many years of aimless ineptitude, its elements had begun to disintegrate. By the time modern dramatists had rescued it from complete intellectual decay it had, along with other human enterprises, undergone tremendous and far-reaching changes. No longer was it backed by the taste and power of a king. Its rulers became as numerous as its seats in the audience and its security was entrusted, for good or bad, to that most doubtful of human institutions: a majority rule. I am not overlooking the fact that its playwrights still held a guiding hand, but their immediate prestige found itself grounded, not upon enduring principles of taste, but upon the dangerous whims of popularity.

Whether we like it or not, the box office became an arbitrary standard. The theatre flourished for many years under the beneficent influences of a satisfied public supporting a group of dramatists who were, whatever their shortcomings, at least enlightened. Its very prosperity during this time was providing secretly some of the diseases whose symptoms are now so widely apparent. Along with all other institutions it began to organize itself commercially. Consolidations were effected and the theatre throughout the United States was put upon a commercial basis. Largely through the efforts of its actors its dictatorship passed from the studio into the business office, so that we are reaping now the fruits of economic mismanagement.

Perhaps mismanagement is too harsh a word when so many

bewildering events have brought the theatre face to face with the most complex problem it has ever been forced to solve.

Business management has seldom had the gift either of clairvoyance or statesmanship, so it may be unjust to blame it entirely for a condition whose causes are so far to seek. Surely though, even a business man in an age which recognizes thoroughly the selfish interest an employer has in the welfare of the employed — surely I say, in such an age a highly organized theatre should have looked to the interests of its players. That it did not brings us, I think, to the immediate clues to its present predicament. For, as I said, when actors are dissatisfied the result affects the economic elements of the theatre, and in 1919 the actors became profoundly dissatisfied.

As one who had every sympathy with the actors under their intolerable working conditions I could wish that they had been allowed by stubborn managers to take less drastic measures to protect themselves. But it is easy to be wise after the event. In such a struggle gentler means would have been effective only if the producers had permitted their use; and surely the actors of our time have righted some ancient wrongs for which they will and should have the everlasting gratitude of all who cherish their art. But this tremendous step with all its ominous affiliations furnished many of the knotty problems we are now facing.

Costs of production have become exorbitant. The manager must mortgage art in the pawnshops of the box office, and playwrights sell their souls, if they are for sale, at the behest of ticket speculators. With so many cheaper means of entertainment at its disposal, the public has become impatient; and when the public, overlord of a democratic theatre, becomes impatient, something, as I said at the outset, is seriously wrong with the theatre.

I am not blind to the fact that many other conditions affect the present situation. Financially, the war and the sudden accumulation of new fortunes had an unexpected and very unfortunate influence. Great wealth in the hands of people without taste or cultural background invariably has a dangerous effect upon its contemporary art — for art, even to those who have no appreciation for it, is a symbol of prestige, and the new rich, yearning for the distinction which money alone cannot buy, sought through the theatre the social and aesthetic contacts which meant nothing to them except the gratification of their own vanity. It was a holiday for mediocre talent, and in the ten years since the armistice we have witnessed a debauch of irresponsible production.

This frenzy helped many an untried playwright to initial success, as is demonstrated amply by the fact that three seasons ago, which may be taken as the climax, fully two-thirds of the successful American plays then running on Broadway were first plays. New blood is good, but we have learned that there is such a thing as unhealthy transfusion, and since that peak of activity our theatre has steadily declined.

In an institution which reacts so sensitively to its public there is no reason to suppose that the situation is fatal. I do not believe that the theatre will die as long as there is an imaginative artist left to preserve the everlasting tragedy and comedy of human relations, but there is no reason why an intelligent society need wait for the patient to get well by himself. There is every evidence that it does not intend to wait. There are many hopeful indications in remote corners of the theatre suggesting at least that it is on the mend.

Believing in the medical theory that successful treatment of a disease presupposes knowledge of the ailment, this study is simply an attempt to correlate symptoms, to provide a fever

chart, and to count accurately a pulse beat. It proceeds from no foregone conclusion. Many of its disclosures may prove negligible. Many others, alas, may be altogether obvious. But they represent the observations of an ardent playgoer who can at least boast for his credentials as an observer the fact that he has bought almost as many tickets as he has been given in these years of professional criticism. Many specialists will no doubt disagree, and I confess to slight awe in the presence of specialists. These notes are submitted with the temerity of an old family doctor who for many affectionate reasons would like to see the patient get well.

L'Orcio, Settignano,  
June, 1929.



## BACKGROUND

### ACTORS

**T**HOUGH usually they, with other artists, are considered casual Bohemians thoughtless of their own welfare, actors have had a singular, and on two occasions a very far-reaching influence on the economic history of the theatre through their business perspicuity. On both occasions they acted for their immediate welfare, and if the events turned out much later to include some unsavory features, these were at least features in a complex organization which could not have been humanly foretold.

The first instance was in the abandonment of stock companies and the creation of traveling companies which led inadvertently to booking syndicates, to the expansion of the theatre as a real estate interest and by various steps to the conditions which forced the actors to defend themselves by union organization.

To understand fully the significance of both these incidents it is necessary to look back for a moment into the remoter history of the American theatre and to understand that for the better part of the nineteenth century many communities in the United States had flourishing theatres of their own.

The first theatre was built in Williamsburg in the colony of Virginia in 1716; but, like the others which followed it, it was a flimsy frame structure, scarcely more than a barn, and it was not until sixty years later that the Southwark Theatre in Philadelphia initiated the first permanent building for theatrical

purposes.<sup>1</sup> Memphis, Mobile, New Orleans and Baltimore soon developed flourishing theatrical interests and they were furnished entertainment by traveling companies which made numerous journeys from house to house.

Sol Smith, for instance, one of the fascinating figures of that time, says in his autobiography dedicated to P. T. Barnum that it was his custom to alternate between Natchez and Port Gibson, fifty miles away. Records indicate that no less a person than Junius Brutus Booth walked twenty-five miles from Richmond to Petersburg to give a performance because he had missed the stagecoach.

In most of these little theatres performances were given only three or four nights a week, and it may delight Mr. St. John Ervine to know that in some of those primitive audiences women were refused admission unless "attended by a gentleman, or someone having the appearance of a man of respectability." The ineffable Ludlow tried the plan in Mobile in 1835 and reports that it worked admirably.

For the most part these early companies were scarcely more than determined amateurs of roving disposition with an enormous zest for the theatre, making up no doubt in vitality what they lacked in skill and understanding. They played Shakespearean tragedies, sometimes comic operas, and a great favorite was Sheridan's romantic play, *Pizarro, or the Virgins of the Sun*. Their limitations were such that astonished town natives would be occasionally pressed into service, and Mrs. Crawford, in her fondly beguiling *Romance of the American Theatre*, gives some hint of the artistic problems in an incident which occurred in 1815 in Pittsburgh, while Samuel Drake, Sr., was presenting Sheridan's ineluctable romance.

<sup>1</sup> Mary Caroline Crawford, *The Romance of the American Theatre*, Little, Brown & Co., 1925.

In the boxes were dark-skinned but beautiful ladies, and in the pit, "foundry men, keel-boat men, and sundry and divers dark-featured and iron-fisted burghers." When the virgins duly entered, the first pair and the second pair were apparently acceptable to the audience, but such were the exigencies of theatrical production in those exuberant times that the resourceful Mr. Drake had been obliged to do with substitutes, and presently his audience was regaled by the sight of the old Irish woman who cleaned the dressing-rooms, and the property man, whose slight error in sex was faintly and no doubt hilariously disguised. Sublimely unconscious of their appearance, they were the last to enter chanting "Oh, Power Supreme." Whereupon "divers iron-fisted burghers" arose as one man, as who would say they knew a virgin when they saw one, and yelled "Such virgins!" Considering the provocation, it seems a very mild outburst, but Mr. Drake, who was occupied at the moment as High Priest of the Sun, stepped to the front of the stage and scolded the disturbers for "insulting a company of comedians who have traveled hundreds of miles to contribute to their pleasure."

Slowly these companies tended to settle in one place, or at least to travel extremely restricted circuits. From these stock companies developed, and the stock companies in turn gave rise to a system of guest stars. English actors of great reputation began to travel to the United States and would go about from one company to another, giving performances. Largely through the efforts of Francis C. Wemyss and Steven Price, who, according to Wemyss, originated "the bold idea of farming out the talent of those actors belonging to the London stage whom he thought might be valuable in the United States," such players as Edmund Kean, Matthews, MacCready, Conway, Charles Campbell, Clara Fischer, Madame Vestris and Fanny Kemble appeared before the American public.

Our own Equity's restrictions against the English players would have delighted American actors of that day, since there was great jealousy and fiercer animosity. So touchy was the public that some of these players were violently attacked when, for instance, through the oversight of a property man, Mac-Cready was obliged in *William Tell* to break an arrow especially prepared for the big apple-splitting scene; the letter writers flew into a rage because he had said "I cannot get such an arrow in this country, Sir," and it was felt that he had imperiled the Constitution.

Fanny Kemble was foolishly assailed because she said Americans did not know how to sit a horse correctly; and when a democratically American Guildenstern tried to shake hands with an imported Prince of Denmark — I think it was Kean — the offending yokel was asked curtly if he would dare to shake hands with a prince. Unchastened, he replied that he would dare to do so with his President, and Anglo-American relations remained then, as now, in the happy state of bitter friendship. These actors, however, from such incidents perhaps as these, became tired of relying on resident companies of indifferent capabilities, and began to take with them on these jaunts first one, then two and at last whole companies of players.

After the Civil War the practice became widespread and by the last decade of the century stock companies had passed out of existence. The significance of this is enormous, because it brought into the theatre a factor which had had no place in organized control by disconnected stock companies — it brought into the theatre the booking agent. The whole fabric of the theatre was changed. The theatre itself, in its physical properties, became real estate as distinct from purely theatrical enterprise.



Thus was fulfilled the prophetic operations of an earlier gentleman in Philadelphia who, in the time of John Quincy Adams, found that "building theatres was supposed not only to be excellent investment of capital at that time, but a good excuse for elderly, sedate, Quaker-bred gentlemen to take a peep at a play, or to look at what was going on behind the scenes, in the character of a stockholder." In another chapter we shall see the modern counterparts of these sedate, but not so Quaker-bred, gentlemen, and what they did to the American theatre some decades later.

This gradual conversion of the theatre into a locally owned investment resulted naturally in a desire to make it a profitable investment. To make money out of them the owners had to keep them occupied with plays which the local public wanted to see, and to get these plays they had recourse to theatrical agents in New York, furnishing thereby the entering wedge for centralized control. Since the theatre district at that time was in the neighborhood of Union Square, these out-of-town managers or their representatives, the booking agents, did business in that neighborhood.

All profitable things tend to stabilize themselves and increase. We find these booking agents presently taking offices and dealing with the manager of a show on one hand and with the manager of some remote provincial houses on the other.

It was a leisurely business in those gracious days of expanding enterprise. A visiting manager would make his customary trip to town, which was by then straggling up Broadway from Chambers Street, and had reached a theatrical centre at Union Square. It was, as always, terrifyingly far uptown in the never ending procession of Manhattan, and was presently, indeed, to be even farther, to move on to Madison Square and Herald Square, and ultimately to entrench itself, with what seems to

be enduring barricades of real estate, in the neighborhood of Forty-second Street.

In those days it meant a showman dealing with showmen, and no foolishness about it. The transactions occurred in the genial atmosphere of the theatre itself, and a provincial manager, coming to Manhattan for his wares, was a person to be reckoned with, a man with at least some background and taste of his own, who knew his local public and wanted to entertain it.

So he would spend his evenings looking over the shows, meeting the New York managers and their stars, and in the sauntering informality of his afternoons he would negotiate contracts on the benches under the trees in Union Square. It was the direct and simple fashion of a not very complicated time, and everyone was satisfied. The out-of-town manager knew what he was getting, knew what his needs were, and had the shrewdness, one hopes, to profit by it.

Presently it became easier to effect these transactions through a third party. Obviously it would save a manager in New York much time and money and effort if he could rely upon some agent to route his play for him, and it is equally obvious that an out-of-town manager could simplify all of his problems by dealing with one man for all of his shows.

To achieve simplicity in business may require very complicated organization, and certainly in this case it required papers and files to put them in, and safes to preserve them. Since none of these adjuncts of business could well be kept either inside a hat band or in the civic precincts of Union Square, the agents moved indoors into little cubby-holes around the theatrical district, and presently the theatre found itself, through the most natural causes in the world, in full possession of a ubiquitous and ravenous parasite. It was a return to the original touring units which first took plays to the American frontiers, but in this later

development it had an essential and fatal difference: the control of their business had passed out of the hands of showmen. It had passed, in the small towns, into the hands of real estate men who owned the theatres, and in the rapidly growing centralization in New York, the other end of the business had passed utterly into the hands of booking agents. Presently the two merged into booking owners.

It is of course idle to bemoan such ancient events, but it is necessary to look at them clearly and without prejudice. What happened then, with so many ensuing complications, was simply the expansion of the theatre as a business. If the theatre were no more than a business the incidents would now represent merely the past steps toward great consolidations, a trend which, in purely commercial enterprises, certainly has the applause and profitable support of all industry.

But it seems that everything interposed between the manager of a play and the public for which it is intended represents a definite obstacle. In this instance, as we shall see, the very shrewdness of the booking agents, and the fact that they facilitated the business of the theatre, led to grave injuries to that other side of the theatre, the side which is its sole excuse for existence, the side, indeed, which basically makes it a good business.

Very logically these booking agents expanded their functions, as any sensible business man would while trying to develop a new field. They represented a detached and all-seeing eye upon the theatrical horizons of the whole country and they discovered what may never have occurred profitably to any individual manager: that there were enormous differences in towns and in theatres. Some were good and some bad. In the weeding out, a huge combination was effected and by 1896 the whole movement which began on a park bench evolved into a single con-

cern of vast power and virtually monopolistic influence. The syndicate held almost undisputed control of the American theatre for nearly a decade. Minor independent producers made futile protests from time to time, but nothing could touch the gigantic enterprise.<sup>2</sup>

Came the Shuberts, Messrs. Sam, Lee and J. J. The first of these was apparently something of a business genius who, after his untimely death in a railroad accident, left his holdings to the two brothers who now administer the Shubert corporation.

Cheered on by a clamor for independence, they met the dragon and did battle. At first amused and then staggered by the upstarts, the All High saw them enlist the aid of such worthies as Harrison Grey Fiske and David Belasco, and, with the sinews of war furnished by a Cincinnati capitalist, the fight went on right merrily until presently, as Mr. Alfred J. Bernheim points out,<sup>3</sup> there was not one giant, but two.

In the astounding sequence of events which followed it is well to remember that we are here dealing with two rival corporations which, if they had been marketing any less fragile commodity, would have been using merely the time-honored methods of high-pressure competition.

To develop any such enterprise means the creation, artificially if necessary, of a demand, and to this end the two booking units sought to stimulate the playgoing public. They are respectable enough tactics for other purposes, having at least the classic example of a nation which found itself the possessor of a

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Hornblow, in his *History of the American Theatre*, II, 318 ff., says: "It was an intolerable situation. The triumph of the syndicate meant the end of honest competition, the degradation of the art of acting, the lowering of the standard of the drama, the subjugation of the playwright and the actor to the capricious whims and sordid necessities of a few men who set themselves up as theatrical despots."

<sup>3</sup> *New York Times*, March 25, 1928.

profitless colonial property, inhabited by natives who went naked and found their food on trees. The government introduced missionaries who taught the natives the evils of nakedness and thus opened a whole train of necessities and supplies, so that presently the tribe became an important economic unit in a far-flung empire, buying anything and everything. No one, however, has yet had the temerity to claim that the poor natives were the happier for their improvements.

On a more sophisticated plane that is about what happened in the United States when civil war was waged for the control of amusements. It has been estimated that the Shuberts' thrilling campaign drove them to build two theatres for every one of Erlanger's. These strenuous methods had the desired effect but they precipitated the whole American theatre into a dangerous state of saturation. Road production increased enormously, but the cost of the battle became terrific. Railroad rates entered into the strategies, and by 1913 both sides discovered, possibly with flattering dismay, that they were fighting to the death over a dying institution. The road had begun to decline. It was feeble for want of audiences. The legitimate theatres stayed dark for weeks at a time, and the ailment was ascribed variously to the movies, cheap automobiles, the phonograph and, as Mr. Benchley had it, the high-wheeled bicycle.

In their frenzy of competition the two great booking agents had deluded the provinces with the offscourings of Broadway, and the provinces, bless their stout hearts, were beginning to notice it. The average number of plays on tour in the United States declined, according to the figures compiled by the *Dramatic Mirror*, from 308 between the years 1900 and 1904 to 68 between the years 1925 and 1927. During the same periods the average number of plays in New York increased from 72 to 208. The frontiers of the theatre had been pushed back to a



narrow strip of land whose real estate reached a fantastic valuation.

The vicissitudes of the road had worked incredible hardships upon those who are the backbone of the theatre. Actors had been treated like cattle in the warfare over the road, and they at last took the only available means of asserting their rights. Without actors there can be no theatre, and these actors in 1919, under the pressure of unemployment, bad contracts, intolerable working conditions and all miseries with which powerless human beings can be afflicted by ruthless wealth — under such pressure, I say, and goaded to desperation — they struck.

The circle was complete. The players had again assumed control of their rightful territory. But their victory, if not Pyrrhic, contained some very dubious winnings. A period of profound depression was to ensue. With increased prices in nearly every field of work, the cost of production mounted with alarming speed. From top to bottom the expenses of the theatre were scaled up, though only a small part of the increase was passed on to the public. The managers were facing a serious financial crisis.

It soon became apparent that the theatre had to have hits or nothing, and the records of the past ten years reveal a frenzied scramble for hits. Anything and everything was produced in the desperate hope that the public would find it to its liking. One successful play found ten eager copyists. Except of course, in the hands of intelligent and well-established producers, the whole situation became a business farce of ridiculous competition. Sensible men reasonably refused to risk their money in such a blind-man's-buff, and the sudden accretion of great wealth in the war afforded a handsome field for ready-made speculation.

Men who apparently had never been in a theatre became sponsors of theatrical absurdities. The bidding, indeed, became



so acute that the theatres of New York were unable to provide space for the tenants, and at one time a few seasons ago there were twenty plays idling on Broadway's doorstep, unable to be taken in.

Observe that for the most part it was none of the public's doing. There was no wild clamor to justify such high-pressure methods. Of the sixty-odd theatres in New York perhaps twenty-five at a liberal estimate in this mid-season of 1928-29 again have flourishing business. The others are fields for speculative activities. Now a sudden awakening to the economic realities of the situation has frightened the fly-by-nighters. Good producers proceeding steadily and intelligently about their well-learned business had no fear, nor have they now. The present situation affects mostly the superficial elements in the theatre, of which it would be well rid.

The slow adjustment of entertainment to the demands of the playgoing public is being made through the natural laws of supply and demand.

Meanwhile, the virtually dormant road is coming to life. Resident stock companies in small communities are being established and the old system of guest stars is coming again into its own — this time, I hope, on a firmer basis of actual talent. The Theatre Guild's touring company is demonstrating that there is a demand for good plays well acted by ordinarily competent players in small communities that have not seen legitimate productions for many years. These are the hopeful signs that the theatre will right itself. There are certain ominous elements, however, springing out of the actors' strike that sooner or later the theatre will have to face.

It is necessary at the moment to examine the immediate causes of the strike and to estimate the very obvious and possibly permanent improvements which the actors have managed to make in their own working conditions.

## ORGANIZATION I

### EQUITY

CONTRARY to lay opinion, which found itself roused to interest only by the actors' strike in 1919, the Actors' Equity Association existed some years before that crisis in its relations with the producing managers. It is necessary to understand its aims and its conduct from the very beginning before its principles can be justly appraised and some estimate made of its influence upon the theatre.

Although vaudeville unions had existed since 1896, and a short-lived Actors' Society for a few futile years ending in 1916, the meeting which resulted in the Actors' Equity Association was held in New York on Sunday, December 22, 1912, when eighty players authorized a committee composed of Albert Bruning, Frank Gillmore, William Harcourt, Charles D. Coburn, Grant Stewart and Milton Sills to "develop a plan for a standard, uniform, equitable contract which, it was agreed, would bring order out of chaos in theatrical business relations."<sup>1</sup>

The purposes of this association were stated in its constitution as follows:

To advance, promote, foster and benefit the profession of acting and the condition of persons engaged therein; to protect and secure the rights of actors; to inform them as to their legal rights and remedies; to advise and assist them in obtaining employment and proper

<sup>1</sup> Paul Fleming Gemmill, Ph.D., *Collective Bargaining by Actors*, Bulletin of U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, No. 402.

compensation therefor; to procure appropriate legislation upon matters affecting their profession; to do or cause its members to do or take such lawful action, as, in the discretion of the council, shall advance, promote, foster, and benefit the profession; to do, or cause to be done, or to refrain from doing such other acts or things, either as an association or through the individual members thereof, as they may lawfully be done or as they may lawfully refrain from doing, as, in the opinion of the council, shall appear advantageous to the profession of acting or to the members of this association engaged in that profession.

Lest it appear by "proper compensation" that Equity stands for collective bargaining over wages, it is important to note that its own voluntary agreement with the managers binds the association for a period of twenty-five years, among other restrictions, not to stipulate or compel "the salary or pay which any actor may request or demand of any producer." The clause has left the union untouched by suspicion of greed and has permitted it to centre its attention on working conditions generally.

What those working conditions were before Equity began its long fight to improve them may be indicated by the following summary, printed in Equity's handbook, 1916:

Actors have often, recently, rehearsed for five weeks or even longer and received only three days' pay; indeed, in one or two cases, nothing at all for their services.

Companies playing in one-night stands have had to lose a Saturday night and its pay in order to jump to a Sunday night performance for which they received no remuneration.

Certain forms of contract now employed by some managers exact six weeks' work at half salary during the season; to wit: two weeks before election, two weeks before Christmas, and two weeks before Easter.

Certain forms of contract contain a clause that obliges the manager to provide transportation only from the point of opening to the point of closing, instead of from New York to New York.

Actresses have been required of late to pay out large sums for gowns, etc., which in case of a play's failure are a serious loss.

Contracts with corporations without the signature of an individual fixing personal responsibility are used as loopholes through which the contracts are shirked.

To correct these conditions a tentative standard contract was drawn up, but the managers were not inclined to take it seriously, and Mr. Lee Shubert expressed something of the general attitude when he branded the scheme as "impracticable as the actor himself."

"No person who delivers as little as the actor is paid so much," he said in the New York *Dramatic Mirror* of March 12, 1913. "The manager gives not only his time and hard work to the production, but he furnishes the costumes and the staging at a great expense. If the play is a failure — and that rests with incomprehensible public tastes — the manager is far the greater loser."

This attitude is important in the light of subsequent events since it touches the root of Equity's later affiliation with the American Federation of Labor, an affiliation which was certainly not thought of when the association was organized. Indeed, as early as 1913 Francis Wilson, president of Equity, had declared: "The Actors' Equity Association is not *per se* a labor union, and it will never become one unless, which is not likely, flagrant injustice on the part of the managers compels it to ally itself with organized labor."

Mr. Wilson's optimism was belied when in January, 1914, the newly formed organization of actors met the United Managers' Protective Association and urged the adoption of a

standard minimum contract. Although several individual managers acceded to the terms, the managers' association rejected the proposals and left the Actors' Equity nothing to do but perfect its organization and await its time.

In June, 1914, the actors issued an official statement denying emphatically that they had "organized for purposes of going on strike if managers failed to subscribe to their terms. Nothing could be farther from the purpose of the organization."

Some hint of the tenor of the situation may be found in the statement credited at the time to Mr. William A. Brady: "Your Actors' Equity Association contract is absolutely fair, but I'll never adopt it unless I'm forced to."

Plainly the threat of force was beginning to loom on both sides, and the *Dramatic Mirror* warned the managers in March, 1916, that they would have only themselves to blame should "the actors join hands with the American Federation of Labor and unionize themselves as the musicians and stage employees have done."

In the same month Mr. Wilson found that his former peaceable aspirations had evaporated in a general curdling of the milk of human kindness, so that he expressed himself as "perfectly convinced" that it would be impossible to effect an agreement with the managers "unless we adopt just such methods as have been adopted by the musicians' union, by the mechanics' union, and by the unions of the other trades and other professions."

Two months later Mr. Milton Sills reviewed the efforts of the actors to obtain an equitable contract and added:

"We have used every means polite and diplomatic to get the managers to accept our contract. We have talked with some of them in full council meeting; they admitted the fairness of our demands, but refused to accede to them. What we have achieved so far we have achieved by moral force, but moral



force can go only so far. Our main object we now realize cannot be obtained by moral force alone."

It was the first open sponsorship by responsible officials of an affiliation with organized labor, and it aroused an enormous and often bitter controversy over whether an actor was an artist or a laborer. Dr. Gemmill's official pamphlet quotes with considerable effect the statement of Hiram K. Moderwell in the *New Republic* for April 22, 1916, that in aesthetics the actor is "beyond question an 'artist,' but in economics he is an artisan, a wage earner, a member of a trade."

It was simply the tortuous outcroppings of the theatre's dual personality, a crisis in its long internal struggle over its elements of art and business. In May, 1916, trade won out by a vote of 718 to 13, wherewith a vote was carried authorizing the executives to seek an alliance with the American Federation of Labor.

At this important juncture, as the actors reached for the heaviest weapon in their arsenal, they found it missing. They could not affiliate with the Federation of Labor because the charter covering the entertainment field was controlled by the White Rats Actors' Union, an association of vaudeville players which had been organized in 1900 and had taken over the charter of the Actors' International Union in 1910. At that time the White Rats numbered about 14,000 members, while Equity had 2,500. As it happened, it was the very year in which the White Rats were broken by the vaudeville interests, so that their charter later became available.

In the meantime, however, Equity made the best use it could of its gathering strength. In October, 1917, the United Managers' Protective Association agreed to put the standard contract into effect, but a survey conducted by Mr. Frank Gillmore in February of the following year disclosed the fact that only



one-fifth of the companies controlled by the subscribing managers had the contract in effect, and this despite the acceptance of the agreement by all except four of the producing managers in New York.

Equity retaliated by instituting the "Equity Policy," an agreement among the signers that they would not enter into any contract except those approved by the general council of the association, the beginning of Equity Shop. Members of Equity were notified in November, 1918, that "you can remain a member of the Actors' Equity Association but you cannot become a member of the Actors' Equity Association unless you sign an Actors' Equity contract."

As this enforcement project was not supposed to go into effect until the following autumn the officials again made an application to the Federation of Labor, and it was again denied, since the only charter available was controlled by the White Rats. Unexpectedly and opportunely for the Equity association, however, the White Rats surrendered their charter on July 18, 1919, and provided the actors with a powerful instrument at the very moment when the managers were beginning to split up among themselves in a dissension which has since marked their conduct and prevented them from acting together in the best interests of the theatre.

When the United Managers' Protective Association was dissolved some of its members, objecting to collective bargaining, formed the Producing Managers' Association which, in a later meeting with Equity to discuss a contract, insisted upon longer periods of free rehearsals. At the same time the actors demanded a standard week of eight performances, and on the failure to agree on either point the conference ended in a deadlock. The breach widened and revealed its true issues when the Producing Managers' Association announced that it would offer its own

contract based on the old Equity contract, but with a provision that in cases of dispute the actor and the manager should each appoint an arbitrator, and these two select a third; in other words it would deprive the actor of the power of collective action.

Equity attempted to conciliate the managers at this point by proposing to submit the differences to Charles E. Hughes and William Howard Taft, both of whom had consented to act as umpires, but the overture was apparently interpreted as a sign of weakening, and on July 9, 1919, the managers declined the offer on the elegant grounds that they had nothing to arbitrate.

Again on July 19 the actors, having the previous day joined the Federation of Labor, renewed their offer of mediation, and this time were kicked verbally down the steps, since the managers found themselves affronted; they declined to appoint a committee, and added that by "the recent action of your association in bringing into your councils men who have proved in the past neither friend to the actor nor to the managers, men who have thrived only in fostering of bitterness and discord where it did not previously exist, your association has made it impossible for any serious conference between it and the Producing Managers' Association."<sup>2</sup>

The situation which now confronted the actors was this, says Dr. Gemmill: "The Producing Managers' Association refused to recognize the right of the actors to bargain collectively through their union, the Actors' Equity Association. This right had been conceded by the old United Managers' Protective Association. It was for the maintenance of this right that the great strike of 1919 was waged and won."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> New York *Dramatic Mirror*, August 7, 1919.

<sup>3</sup> *Collective Bargaining by Actors*, U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, No. 402, p. 10.

On August 7 some 1,400 members of Equity attended a rally and adopted a resolution committing themselves "not to perform any service for any manager who is a member of the Producing Managers' Association or who refuses to recognize our association or issue its contract" until Equity would be recognized and its contract adopted. Mr. E. H. Sothorn made a final desperate attempt to reopen the discussion with the managers, but without success, and when the strike order went out twelve theatres were closed instantly. By August 16 four more had been shut, and four days later there were only five theatres in New York presenting dramatic or musical performances.

Ensuing events have small place in this brief survey, which concerns itself chiefly with the motives and methods used by the actors in gaining control of their own affairs. All of the steps which usually characterize such bitter struggles, save rioting and military intervention, were taken on both sides. The Federation of Labor sent experienced strike leaders to help the actors conduct their campaign, and other unions working in the theatre called sympathetic strikes. Toward the end of August the Actors' Fidelity League was organized, some said at the instigation of Mr. E. F. Albee, who had used similar measures to break the White Rats in 1917, by organizing the National Vaudeville Artists, Inc., a company union, while others contended that it was merely a way out for the managers who wanted to make peace but did not want to make it with Equity, and so sought by "even more favorable contracts" to divert Equity's membership to the new association. Such members of Fidelity as Henry Miller, George M. Cohan and Howard Kyle declared that their group was formed simply in protest against the affiliation of Equity with organized labor.

At any rate nothing came of the efforts to shift the basis of attack or to dissuade Equity from throwing its whole strength

into action. The movement spread to Chicago, and a subsidiary organization known as the Chorus Equity Association developed to safeguard the interests of members of musical comedy choruses. By the first of September the managers were able to realize the cost of the strike, and on September 3 they made negotiations for a truce. On September 6 the strike ended with the signing of a "basic agreement."

"To the actors," Dr. Gemmill reports, "the most vital provisions of the agreement" were these:

1. It definitely recognized the right of the Actors' Equity Association to represent its members in their dealings with the managers.
2. It provided for the use, by all members of the Producing Managers' Association, of a standard minimum contract.
3. It agreed to submit to arbitration all questions of dispute between manager and actor, or between their respective associations.

During the next eighteen months there was considerable speculation over whether Equity could hold its enormous enrollment in a continuously influential organization. Many of the new members drifted away, and the charge was made that some of the managers were, in defiance of the strike agreement, discriminating against union members. To maintain its integrity Equity instituted what has come to be known as "Equity Shop" against unorganized managers who did not belong to the Producing Managers' Association.

In the storm of protest which the action caused Equity defined the Equity Shop as "simply a declaration of Equity actors of their absolute right to refuse to work in a company with non-members," and added that "no Equity member will accept an engagement in a company which is not 100 per cent Equity."

Although this is what is technically known as a closed shop, Dr. Gemmill makes an important distinction, a distinction in-

deed which saves Equity from the charge of imposing artisan standards upon dealers in an art, since "anyone can join the Actors' Equity Association who has an engagement to play on the speaking stage, whether he has had experience or not." This situation is defined by Dr. Gemmill as "a closed union shop with an open union," a combination which has the honest and direct effect of enforcing collective bargaining and nothing more. It was a policy adopted to protect Equity against loss of members, since actors who were not members couldn't work in Equity casts. It has since proved most effective in the Dramatists' League, an association to protect playwrights.

When the strike agreement with the Producing Managers' Association expired in 1924 the managers asked for an extension of the old terms, which would have had the effect of exempting the members of the Producing Managers' Association from the regulations of Equity Shop. The actors refused to do this, and the managers refused to accept the Equity Shop policy. Then twenty-seven managers of the group drew up a round robin, pledging themselves not to produce under Equity Shop conditions and declaring that such restrictions "would work enduring harm to the art of the theatre, and that it would be humiliating, unjust, and un-American."

The upshot of this was that twenty-one managers who had not signed the round robin formed a subsidiary association, while retaining membership in the Producing Managers' Association. This new group, including such producers as the Shuberts, Mr. Brady and L. Lawrence Weber, was called the Managers' Protective Association, and forthwith signed a ten-year basic agreement with Equity on May 13, 1924, providing for the so-called 80:20 ratio, by which members of the producing group are allowed to include in their casts non-members

of Equity up to twenty per cent of the total number of players in the company.

Thus Equity has achieved a signal victory and safeguarded its gains in an administration that has been both flexible and uncommonly astute. It has managed admirably and with great dignity to maintain its rights as labor without impairing its standards in art, but it is bound, through the very nature of a business art, to find itself perpetually confronted by problems which labor unions do not ordinarily have to face. On any ultimate scale of values its obligations lie in the drama, and because of its alliances it should feel impelled to align other unions to its same viewpoint and protect the theatre from the threat of excessive demands backed by such tremendous and even ominous power. Through these happy reforms labor should find itself in the theatre in a position to recognize the fact that the art of the theatre comes first, or else there will be nothing on which to work.

This is no utopian plea, nor an announcement of the expected millenium, but only a warning to all parties in a complex institution that their interests are too tightly bound together now to make further warfare anything less than disastrous.



## ORGANIZATION II

### LABOR AFFILIATIONS

**I**N the pressure of battle during the strike, the actors turned in desperation to other workers in the theatre for sympathy and support. It was a war-time alliance which, like many such entanglements, has resulted in a precarious peace.

Through all of the peculiar relations of union labor and organized art the theatre has been delivered to a power which must be very wise if the theatre is to maintain control of its own art.

Since this matter is partly technical and the subject of violent controversy I offer at the outset a statement of an admitted expert. When he retired from active American production, Gilbert Miller, managing director of Charles Frohman, Inc., made the following statement<sup>1</sup>:

The costs of producing are constantly increasing and the margin of profit is small. There are all kinds of factors to deal with. If, for example, a play has been on a tryout tour for more than six weeks, I must employ a road crew of stage hands in addition to the crew provided by the theatre, even though the play has only a single setting which remains standing for the entire performance. During the engagement of the Reinhardt company last season the stage hands received \$4,400 a week — more money than the actors, although the latter included a long list of well-known players.

Should I desire to engage the services of a well-known artist to draw my scenic designs, he is compelled to join the union at a cost

<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, December 6, 1928.

of \$1,000. If he does not pass the union's examination, a producer may not use his services unless he pays a union man \$250 to approve each sketch.

Transfer companies have further regulations that a producer must comply with. To move scenery from one house to another, even if the theatres adjoin, the union requires that hauling-trucks be used, notwithstanding that the trucks remain idle while the scenery is moved by hand.

As for the musicians, if a play with music carries its own orchestra or jazz band, the union insists that the producer must engage an equal number of musicians who do nothing but collect wages for being idle.

To top off all this, the Actors' Equity Association, which I know is a force for good in the theatre, draws up regulations restricting the employment of foreign actors. I know several producers who have been seriously embarrassed in casting by this rule.

The result of all this is that a play with a well-known star, which played to receipts of \$21,000 in Washington, made a profit of only \$1,500. Another play, on weekly receipts of \$12,000, made a profit for the producer of exactly \$10.

I am criticizing a system that makes producers pay for things they don't get. It is driving producers to make smaller and fewer productions, thereby keeping many people out of work. In earlier years a producer could indulge in the luxury of an occasional failure, but now it is too expensive. There is no charm in becoming bankrupt.

This states the case so thoroughly and clearly that it is useless to present more details simply to embroider it, but the instances are so grotesque that I think one or two ought to be included, partly for documentation and partly for the gaiety of nations. There was a case, for instance, during the annual Little Theatre Tournament, which happened to be on this particular occasion in the Bayes, which is a roof theatre.

The Little Theatre Tournament is a contest among amateur

groups of players mostly from communities near New York, though other more distant groups frequently compete. The tournament runs for a week, and on each night three one-act plays are produced by three separate organizations. I call attention to the fact that they are amateur organizations.

Since it is impossible under the fire laws of New York to store scenery except for productions actually on the stage, it is the practice of each group to deliver its own scenery some time during the day of its performance. In this particular case the scenery had been sent, I believe, from Brooklyn, and it was pouring rain when the transfer van arrived at the stage door and offered the scenery for delivery, as the legal phrase has it, at the threshold, from which point it is handled by the stage hands. The stage hands, so I am told, declined to take the scenery in from the sidewalk because the theatre group had committed the sin of employing, quite innocently, a non-union truck. The scenery was left in the rain and was about to be ruined when an agent of the stage hands' union, it seems, finally consented to take it in for a fee of fifteen dollars.

During the appearance of Margaret Anglin in *Lady Dedlock* audiences were regaled during the intermissions by the foolish tootling of a four piece orchestra which had no more connection with the play than I have, but which under union regulations was entitled to sit in the pit, spout its unnecessary program and, what is more to the point, collect its wages.

In the fall of 1926 Mr. Jed Harris opened at the Broadhurst Theatre a play called *Broadway*. It had one set which stood on the stage untouched for nearly eighteen months, but it was chaperoned in its static condition by some highly experienced and no doubt charming gentlemen who set back-stage at the expense of the producer and enjoyed, I suppose, a year and a half of pinochle.

Another instance of flagrant abuse was afforded by the production of St. John Ervine's play, *The Ship*, by the Washington Square Players in the Brooklyn Little Theatre.

The Washington Square Players are students or workers in the Drama Department of New York University who present several plays each year under the auspices of Professor Randolph Somerville, the head of the department. For the purpose they usually enlist the aid of some well-known actor who takes part in the production and usually directs the students, though the whole project is well within the narrowest limits set for amateur groups. Some years ago the lamented Louis Calvert, for whom Shaw wrote *You Never Can Tell*, appeared with them in a production of that play.

In the instance now cited Miss Margaret Wycherly directed and acted with the players, and for the scenery the university had bought, so I am informed, some sets from a warehouse for several hundred dollars. Since the company operates on a very meagre budget it usually makes, and always handles, its own scenery. Hence, I am told by an interested person, when a union truck arrived at the stage door with the settings, a walking delegate from the Academy of Music, next door, warned the driver that it was a non-union house, and that union scenery could not be delivered to it. The ultimate result was that the scenery had to be burned to prevent its becoming an obstruction to traffic.

The use of mechanical music for off-stage effects in numerous plays, resulting from the perfection of phonographs, has grown considerably and constitutes, of course, just as the talkies do, a menace to the musicians' union.

To protect musicians against the encroachments of this mechanical competition it was decreed that any show travelling with such a device had to pay also a regular musician. The

farce reached a most acute situation when, in Newark, an important Broadway production had to employ a musician to turn the crank of the instrument, a field of musical endeavor in which he had, alas, never been instructed, so that as it eventuated after all some non-musical gentleman, drawing considerably less pay, had to oblige with the off-stage effects.

Nothing can possibly be gained by even intimating that the picture is without its other side. Unions seldom exist until workers in any field are driven to protect themselves against the depredations of their employers, and the stage unions are certainly not exceptions to the rule.

The very nature of the theatre subjects its workers to all sorts of unusual and often cruel demands. People at rehearsals can rarely be clocked with the punctuality and accuracy of office help. Yet the drama's dual nature of art and business makes it unjust, sometimes, to leave no latitude. Art cannot always promise to quit at the five o'clock whistle; it isn't made that way.

Nor, on the other hand, should labor be expected to give its services to the creation of a potentially valuable piece of property without guaranteed rewards. The rights of both sides are so clearly evident that danger lies only in open transgression. It seems to me that the unions are entitled to the highest scale possible as long as it is consistent with the highest potential earnings of the production, and that, on the same basis, they should refrain from forcing up the expenses beyond the actual necessities of the enterprise. In other words, the actual requirements of any given production should be judged and the union stipulations made to fit the natural needs. While the immediate result of such practice might be to leave fewer jobs for workmen, its ultimate effect would be, through the reduc-

tion of expense, to sustain more plays, so that in the end there might be more jobs.

These horrible examples are cited, not against labor itself, nor against the fundamental soundness of union organization. They are criticisms of policies of administration which suggest that union executives are taking a very short-sighted interest in the welfare of their member workmen. For it seems to me that when labor is paid for work that it does not do it places itself directly in the category of monopolistic capital. The strength of union and its inestimable value lies in the fact that it insures fair wages and honest treatment for those who perform a definite and necessary service. When they put themselves in the position of accepting pay for lazing about the theatre they automatically become very expensive parasites, and all the good will in the world cannot change the essential fact that they are holding up managers because their affiliation with actors gives them power to do so.

It would be equally foolish to contend that the theatre cannot operate under such heavy liabilities, for so great is the income from a successful play that it can stand almost any expense and its owners usually find it more profitable to pay and keep quiet. The trouble, though, is that many worthy plays might have a chance of living if they were not laboring under impossible difficulties.

An example of the enormously increased cost of production, of which a normal increase in wages, costs of material and other items may be counted out as legitimate, was cited by Kenneth MacGowan when he and his associates produced in the Greenwich Village Theatre some years ago a play called *The Saint*, by Stark Young:

The scenery cost \$2,349 for two settings that would have come to no more than \$1,000 before the war. Properties, almost all of



which would once have been taken from storage or borrowed, cost \$293. Lights, an unknown item in the days when the stock equipment of foots and border lights in every theatre would do for every play, came to \$487, a figure half as large as most producers would have spent. Costumes, another item that would have meant only a negligible rental before the war, entailed an expense of \$1,584. For an attraction like this there are additional expenses of \$1,000 to \$1,500 for cartage, and preliminary advertising, publicity and photographs easily doubled the amount that used to be spent.

If the author had not himself directed this production a fee of \$2,000 would have had to be charged in, besides 1 per cent of the gross intake each week as director's royalty; this might have been covered by \$600 in earlier days. Under the union scale the scene designer, if Robert Edmond Jones had not been a salaried member of the staff, would have received \$750 for his sketches and supervision, and perhaps as much again for his costume drawings. Here we have a total of close to \$10,000 as the cost of producing *The Saint* today, against perhaps \$2,500 fifteen or twenty years ago.<sup>2</sup>

Here was an intelligent group with small resources trying to make the very best artistic production of a play in which they had faith. Without going into the merits of the play, their very sponsorship of it — in fact its very authorship — suggests that it was a play entitled to a hearing, yet it was obliged to go before the public with a millstone of debt around its neck so that it was drowned almost before it was overboard.

There are innumerable such instances, so that the vicious and dangerous tendency toward long runs has virtually forced the theatre to live by the hit — or miss — system in which a play is either an enormous success or an immediate and overwhelming failure. It is unfair, and every factor which creates or tends to create this utterly artificial valuation of drama must be

<sup>2</sup> *Harpers Magazine*, December, 1928.

altered for its own salvation, to say nothing of the salvation of the art for which it lives.

Labor is bound, sooner or later, to yield some of its selfish interests in the larger interests of the theatre. I think it can do that without sacrificing one iota of its hard-won and eminently valuable rights.

## ORGANIZATION III

### THE ROAD

IT is unthinkable that smaller communities in the United States which betrayed such passionate interest in the organizations of the theatre and its widespread activities during the early part of the last century should be willing to let it die out. It seems probable that they have merely suspended activities until the theatre throws off the stifling business influence imposed upon it by New York and resumes its more local responsibilities. Hard-fisted pioneers carried the drama throughout the states and, for the most part, created New York the dramatic capital. Since New York has failed in its administration of the road it will take another group of hard-fisted pioneers to overcome, this time not the wilderness of nature, but the wilderness of the movies.

What we need — what, for that matter the theatre in general needs — is more adventurous spirits of the type of Ludlow and Drake and Sol Smith, who with the zeal of missionaries, convoyed the drama throughout an undeveloped country with the exuberant and broad-beamed spirit of politicians or pioneer preachers. These men may not have been artists, but they were certainly apostles, and their amazing careers chart the bright beginnings of the theatre on what has come to be known disdainfully as “the road.”

Ludlow and his wife carried a floating theatre from Nashville to New Orleans via the Cumberland, Ohio and Mississippi

rivers, and found that a very suitable theatre had been built in Natchez and had been used from time to time by amateurs. They found New Orleans an amazing sophisticate, familiar with the theatre in many American cities and partial to importations from France and England. In 1819 they gave the first theatrical performance ever held in St. Louis.

That the theatre, even in those zestful days, stood in perennial need of reform is suggested in a house bill posted by Sol Smith when he presented his company in the St. Charles Theatre in New Orleans in 1843. It is certainly a stone tablet from a theatrical Mount Sinai, and some of the managers who reduced the theatre to its present state might do worse than memorize it, if not with their hearts, at least with their tongues. Sol Smith said:

Being impressed with the belief that the public can very well dispense with playbill puffs and extravagant eulogiums on the performers who enact the plays which are represented; believing that visitors to the theatre may possibly be capable of distinguishing the different grades of talent possessed by the several actors, without the aid of capital letters to enlighten their powers of perception, supposing there are individuals attached to the dramatic professions who possess considerable merit, but are willing to form engagements for longer periods than six nights; and being convinced that the true interests of the drama call for reformation in the style and manner of making announcements, the management of the new St. Charles propose: First, to issue posting bills of a uniform size throughout the season, and printed on a single sheet. Second, to cause the names of the characters in the pieces represented, and the names of the performers appointed to enact them, to be printed on the bills in a uniform size. Third, to confine the notices emanating from this establishment to a plain and simple statement of the entertainments each night, the cast of the characters, and such other information relative to the performance as may be deemed proper to communicate to the

public. Fourth, to make no statements whatever of *the great success* which has attended the representation of a play, or of the numerous requests at the box office for its repetition. Fifth, to make no promises without the full assurance of being able to fulfil them, nor to announce engagements with eminent individuals for limited periods until they have actually arrived in the city; to advertise no pieces with "new scenery, dresses and decorations," unless such appointments are in readiness. And finally, the management is resolved to make this new "temple" now to be opened to the public no party to the system of deception which has been generally practiced for many years throughout the theatrical world.

They played anywhere and everywhere, and Smith tells of a performance of *The Lovers' Quarrel* arranged by a man so determined to enjoy a dramatic performance that he "tore up his household linen to make wicks for candles and utilized for candlesticks half a dozen large potatoes, and arranged the net result on the floor in front of the improvised curtain, to serve as footlights." The performance terminated abruptly and the lovers were even more abruptly reconciled when the lights began to go out upon what, Sol Smith insists, was a typical performance.

With one quotation from Smith's diary we may leave the backgrounds of this rude and vigorous period of the theatre to the imagination:

Wednesday. Rose at break of day. Horse at door. Swallowed a cup of coffee while the boy was tying on leggins. Reached Washington at 8. Changed horses at 9; again at 10; and at 11. At 12 arrived at Port Gibson. Attended rehearsal; settled business with the stage manager. Dined at 4. Laid down and endeavored to sleep at 5. Up again at 6. Rubbed down and washed by Jim (a Negro boy). Dressed at 7. Acted the *Three Singles* and *Splash*. To bed at 11½.

Thursday. Rose and breakfasted at 9. At 10 attended rehearsal for

the pieces of the next day. At 1 leggers tied on, and braved the mud for the fifty-mile ride. Rain falling all the way. Arrived at Natchez at half past 6. Rub down and took supper. Acted *Ezekiel Homespun* and *Delph* to a poor house. To bed (stiff as steel-yards) at 12.

Friday. Cast pieces; counted tickets; attended rehearsal until 1 P.M. To horse again and Port Gibson; arrived at 7. No time to eat dinner or supper! Acted in *The Magpie and the Maid* and *No Song, No Supper*, in which latter piece I managed to get a few mouthfuls of cold roasted mutton and some dry bread, that being the first food tasted this day!

It is interesting to see how directly the present provincial theatre parallels its early history. All over the country little theatres have sprung up and increased with amazing rapidity. It is conservatively estimated that their number has increased 400 per cent during the past ten years. Many of them are afflicted by the foolish purposes satirized so brilliantly by George Kelly in his play *The Torch Bearers*, but a few at least are proceeding with very definite aims to make themselves good theatres and trust in that to supply the civic consciousness and community spirit and such other club phrases which mean nothing unless coupled with intelligent labor in the theatre itself. The theatre is a social force only when it is a successful theatre, and community groups which centre their attention on putting on good shows instead of creating some vague and sterile civic uplift stand in better prospect of being helpful to their community than do all the achievements of self-conscious and self-righteous artiness.

In *The American Dramatist* Montrose J. Moses makes some very pointed observations on the growth of little theatres in the United States, though I suspect that so tolerant an observer would find it necessary to make some exceptions that have occurred in the twelve years since the present available edition of



his book was published. His fear for the little theatres was based on the fact that its exponents in this country explain their existence as due to an impulse which they said was similar to that underlying the Abbey and Manchester theatres. He charges that they gave scant thought to the social conditions which created such art centres in Great Britain, and declares that the effectiveness of these little theatres in Britain was due "very largely to the fact that they encouraged native playwrights who were endowed with common tradition, with sympathetic national vision, and with an individual dramatic gift together with a literary sense of the fitness of things."<sup>1</sup>

In support of this he cites a statement of W. B. Yeats when the Irish National Dramatic Society was established. Mr. Yeats said:

Our movement is a return to the people . . . and the drama of society would but magnify a condition of life which the countryman and the artisan could but copy to their hurt. The play that is to give them a quite natural pleasure should either tell them of their own life or of that life of poetry where every man can see his own image, because there alone does human nature escape from arbitrary conditions. Plays about drawing-rooms are written for the middle classes of great cities, for the classes who live in drawing-rooms, but if you would uplift the man of the roads you must write about the roads, or about the people of romance, or about great historical people.

Since he was at one time manager of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Mr. St. John Ervine is fully aware of the influence of these theatres in England, and his opinion on this phase of the subject carries some weight:

I am a repertory theatre man. I assert that these small and harassed theatres have done great service to the community. They were on

<sup>1</sup> *The American Dramatist* (Boston: Little Brown & Co.), p. 311.

the point of reaping the reward of their work when the war for Culture began. An audience had been created for meritable plays in various cities and that audience, although it was not extravagantly large, was large enough for practical purposes and it was growing. The Birmingham Repertory Theatre provided a training ground for Mr. John Drinkwater, whose play, *Abraham Lincoln*, would probably not have been produced at all if its performance had depended upon the judgment of a West End manager. It was in this theatre, too, that Mr. Rutland Boughton's opera, *The Immortal Hour*, was given suitable introduction to the general public. The Abbey Theatre in Dublin was the training ground for John Millington Synge and Mr. Lennox Robinson, to name the more prominent of its dramatists. Had it not been in existence the singular genius of Synge might never have been directed toward drama at all; but whether it would or not, can we believe that any West End manager would have given house room to *The Playboy of the Western World* or *Riders to the Sea*?<sup>2</sup> The Gaiety in Manchester was the training ground of Stanley Houghton, Mr. Charles McEvoy, and Mr. Allan Monkhouse. I do not believe that any West End manager would have accepted *Hindle Wakes* had Houghton first offered it to one. The Playhouse in Liverpool was the training ground for one of the cleverest of our revue writers, Mr. Ronald Jeans. And the Court in London, under the Vedrenne-Barker management (which may be described as the source from which the repertory theatres drew most of their strength), was the theatre in which Mr. Shaw, Mr. Galsworthy, Mr. Granville-Barker, the late St. John Hankin and many others were brought before the general public. In short, the most substantial names in modern English drama belong to men who learned their craft and were given their first opportunities in repertory theatres. Mr. Eugene O'Neill, the most interesting of American dramatists, learned his job and got his first opportunities in small theatres near Washington Square; and M. Jacques Copeau, in the Vieux Colombier in Paris, has provided a similar training ground for young French dramatists of the quality of M. Charles Vildrac.

<sup>2</sup> St. John Ervine, *The Organized Theatre*, Macmillan & Co., 1924.

And if we turn from dramatists to plays we find that the repertory theatres have not only done valuable work in training and encouraging young dramatists whose work, but for the existence of the repertory theatres, would probably not have been produced at all, but in addition have enabled provincial playgoers to see the work of established dramatists, foreign and native. It is unlikely, had there not been any repertory theatres in England, that multitudes of provincial playgoers would ever have seen the work of great dramatists of all ages and races, such as Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptmann, Schnitzler, Maeterlinck, Rostand, Verhaeren, Sudermann, Tolstoy, Tchekov, Bernard Shaw, Galsworthy, St. John Hankin, Arnold Bennett, Harley Granville-Barker and John Masefield, among the moderns, and Euripides, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Congreve, Beaumont and Fletcher, Goldsmith and Sheridan, among the classics. Plays by all these authors were produced by Miss Horniman in Manchester. Does anyone imagine that many of them would ever have been introduced to the Manchester public but for her.<sup>2</sup>

Events have proved that in the American theatre, at least, Mr. Moses was right in assuming that no such local elements would influence these little theatres, for during the past ten years the American theatre has gone wholesale into an exploration of its native folklore, and yet every single play of any importance dealing with sectional life has been produced on Broadway, not in the province of its origin. Notable examples are *Sun Up*, *The Shame Woman*, *Porgy*, *In Abraham's Bosom*, *They Knew What They Wanted* and *This Fine Pretty World*, to name only an obvious few. This suggests, I think, that our little theatre may never be the initiating force in the American theatre, since New York dominates the drama, not only financially, but intellectually. Authors naturally want a Broadway production in the hope of Broadway success which will bring them immediate fame and fortune. But I do think that the little theatre will provide a stimulus outside of New York, and that it

is already showing signs of tremendous usefulness in making America — God help me for the term — theatre conscious. The work and shortcomings of these little theatres are discussed more fully in a later chapter.

It is unfair to cast back into a man's teeth his predictions of twelve years ago, but Mr. Moses' dejection over the possible value of little theatres is a good springboard for a cautious plunge into the future. He said:

We wonder whether the Washington Square Players with all their community ambition and with all their independence have satisfied their own clientèle sufficiently to make a livelihood, or whether they have attracted the public sufficiently to give them encouragement for their future performance. The organization has presented plays which are of interest, but their choice of repertory has not been representative of what theatregoers really want. . . . Such a group of aesthetes must inevitably stand outside the real movement of the theatre today, outside the real revolt. They have only imitated in spirit the continental idea which is a fixed idea among amateurs.<sup>3</sup>

This prophecy was about an organization which, single handed, did most to restore the theatre to its rightful intellectual level and became thereby the most important production unit, I think we can safely claim, in the world. Mr. Moses was talking about the Theatre Guild, and it is significant that it has remained for the Theatre Guild to stimulate the road to something like its old-time activities by giving small communities fine plays with successful runs on Broadway behind them, performed by Theatre Guild companies which live up in every respect to the standards of New York production. So successful was the first excursion of Theatre Guild touring companies that the field was almost doubled, and audiences which had not seen a legitimate production for fifteen or twenty years beheld again

<sup>3</sup> *The American Dramatist*, pp. 319-20.

the peerless delights of the spoken drama. It was the first time in the 150-year history of the American theatre when money was mixed with brains in an attempt to provide entertainment for what has been contemptuously labeled "the sticks." Scenery was transported by farm wagons and in several instances the company had to provide deal tables for use in dressing-rooms. Strange and unlikely premises were utilized with all the fine-flavored gusto that Sol Smith and Ludlow and Drake and the others showed when their erratic stars first splurged across the American horizon.

The Theatre Guild's practice is as sound commercially as it is theatrically. Their whole success is based on what amounts to a genius for finding interesting plays and performing them in the face of tremendous difficulties. They merely send these out to small communities, arranging with each community for the performance to be underwritten in advance. Thus they are not subjected to the hazards of indifference. If a town wants a show, it buys it in the same way that an individual would buy a ticket. If it does not, the show is saved the disastrous attempts to make a sale. All over the country little theatre groups have been of great assistance in arranging for these appearances of Theatre Guild companies. If some of the adventurous qualities of the old theatre are lacking in this plan, it at least saves the high cost of adventure and what often turned out to be bankruptcy and chaos.

Since these activities of the Theatre Guild are likely to have a far-reaching and perhaps early effect on the course of the theatre in the United States, it may be well to include an extensive report on this phase of the Guild's activities.

Until 1927 it confined its actual production to New York, and leased its successful productions to other managements for touring purposes. Then, observing that it was an enormously



profitable field if carefully and sympathetically handled, the Guild decided to manage its own touring units, and on April 14, 1927, made its first production out of New York when Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* was presented at the Adelphi Theatre in Philadelphia with great success.

The following season the Guild formed what was known as the Theatre Guild Repertory Company and presented four plays: *The Guardsman* by Molnar, *Arms and the Man* by Bernard Shaw, *The Silver Cord* by Sidney Howard and *Mr. Pim Passes By* by A. A. Milne. These plays were presented in one-night stands, three-day stands, and week stands, with considerable success. This was the fall of 1927, and the Company's season ran into early April, 1928.

Also, in the fall of 1927, the Guild accepted an invitation from the Repertory Theatre of Chicago (Mrs. Samuel Insull) to come to the Studebaker Theatre for an eight-week season. Having *Porgy* to produce in New York, the invitation could readily be accepted and the full strength of what the Guild calls its Acting Company—consisting of Lynn Fontanne, Alfred Lunt, Helen Westley, Dudley Digges, Henry Travers, Earle Larimore, Margalo Gillmore and others—went out to Chicago and played in *The Guardsman*, *The Second Man*, *Pygmalion*, and also produced there *The Doctor's Dilemma*. On the way to Chicago *Pygmalion* was played in Cleveland for a week, and on the way back from Chicago *The Doctor's Dilemma* was played in Baltimore, thus giving the Acting Company a ten-week season out of New York.

Chicago, incidentally, was started on a subscription basis and for its first season some twelve hundred subscribers were enrolled. In 1928, the second subscription season in Chicago, there were seven thousand subscribers, and indications are that the number will be greatly increased.



Late in the spring of 1928 the Guild took *Porgy* out of its immensely successful New York run and sent it on a seven-week hopscotch tour of certain cities, among them being Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Detroit and Cincinnati, and in each of these cities the Guild's subscription plan was expounded. During the engagements of *Pygmalion* in Cleveland and *The Doctor's Dilemma* in Baltimore prospective subscribers to the Guild were enrolled in both cities.

In September, 1928, the Guild's Acting Company, divided into two sections, one to remain in New York and one to tour, took up in earnest the plans which the board of managers had made for the Guild on tour. First, the Theatre Guild Repertory Company was to continue, and in its second season consisted of a new group of actors playing *The Doctor's Dilemma*, *The Second Man*, *John Ferguson* and *Ned McCobb's Daughter*. This company was routed somewhat differently from the first season's company, as the experience of that trip taught several lessons.

The Acting Company, in the fall of 1928, began subscription seasons in six cities: Chicago (second season), Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pittsburgh and Cleveland. In Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston each play was given for two weeks. In Baltimore, Cleveland and Pittsburgh each play was given for one week. The plays taken on tour in 1928-29 and presented on the subscription plan were *Porgy*, played by a separate unit of Negro actors; *The Guardsman* and *Arms and the Man*, played by one unit of the Acting Company including Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne; and *Marco Millions* and *Volpone*, played by a unit which included Earle Larimore and Margalo Gillmore. It was hoped to include Cincinnati and Washington in the first season's plans, but the necessity of having the Acting Company back in New York made this impossible.

Meanwhile, in New York the season and the central organization proceeded as usual with productions of *Faust*, *Major Barbara* and *Wings Over Europe*. It became evident, however, to the Guild's board of managers that a much larger company would be necessary in order that the forces might not be depleted when certain units took to the road. Therefore the plans for the season of 1929-30 called for an enlarged company so cast that each member would appear in New York and on tour during the same season, thereby putting the road cities and the New York productions on the same basis, a condition which has not existed for many years.

The Guild proposes, at this writing, to visit ten cities instead of six, the original six having been retained and Washington, Cincinnati, Detroit and St. Louis added.

In addition to these activities a special company of *Strange Interlude* was organized to tour the Middle West and the Pacific Coast, and it turned out to be one of the most successful tours of recent years, since all performances were sold out as far as a week to two weeks in advance before the arrival of the company in a town.

The Guild's present plans include the discontinuance of the name of the Repertory Company and the actual enlargement of that group so that the cities formerly served by the Repertory Company will be visited by a section of the Guild's company playing *Marco Millions*, *Volpone* and *R. U. R.* Mr. Lunt and Miss Fontanne will make a hurried tour in *Caprice*, and *Wings Over Europe* will be sent on tour separately. *Major Barbara* and *Pygmalion* will travel as a unit. The New York company of *Strange Interlude* will tour, and in certain of the subscription cities *R. U. R.* will be shown.

These plays in the ten subscription cities will all be offered on a subscription basis. In Chicago each play will be presented

for three weeks instead of two, due to the increase in the number of subscribers there. The entire arrangement marks the introduction of the subscription plan in connection with the legitimate theatre on the road, an object for which the Guild labored long and carefully by means of slow educational work, and its continuing success obviously depends on the satisfaction of the underwriting audiences all over the United States.

Since the Guild quite plainly, through its change of plans, recognizes the danger of expansion, and the effect of the process on its home productions, and since, too, it appears to have taken some measures to protect itself against undermining its chief avowed function which is the production of intelligent plays in New York, it may not be beside the point to dwell upon that danger. For no producing unit is stronger, ultimately, than the productions it offers to the public for its support, and it was painfully apparent during the season of greatest road expansion that the New York interests were suffering. Compared to other seasons of the Guild it was painfully undistinguished, even by its failures; and unless the Guild wishes to erect a monument to the thing it set out to destroy, it will have to guard its reputation more jealously than ever. Otherwise it will simply repeat with the road — on a higher intellectual level, I admit — the history of disillusion and neglect which already marks that sad chapter in the commercial enterprise of the theatre. At this moment, though, the Guild activities appear to hold most of the hope for the revival of the road upon a newer and sounder basis.<sup>4</sup>

It should be remembered, too, that to certain of its favorites

<sup>4</sup> Since this was written the Theatre Guild has made two productions in London, initiating what promises to be a permanent international expansion. It increases the risk, and may, one hopes, increase the rewards.

the road has never been dead. Such players as Otis Skinner, Mrs. Fiske, George Arliss and William Hodge have always had great followings outside of New York, and large "all-star" productions of the classics have met with gratifying response.

More significant, however, is the gradual recrudescence of stock companies. During the past decade Mr. Bernheim finds an astounding increase in the number of stock companies, and he estimates that there are more than two hundred now playing in various parts of the United States.<sup>5</sup> In his survey for the Actors' Equity he reports that stock circuits are being organized over which so-called "rotary companies" will tour. Travelling tent shows, of which he says there are at least one hundred and fifty, are reaching the smaller communities along with the Chautauqua and Lyceum circuits which each year include a number of legitimate dramas in their courses, frequently with minor actors from New York who may have been members of the original casts. He says there are a dozen showboats in operation on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers.

These influences cannot well be discounted since they represent, in some instances at least, an almost instinctive rebuilding of the theatre in the face of generally apathetic management from the theatrical capital, and an intelligent interest in the drama which may save it on the road from the vicissitudes of business which have so perniciously beset it and brought it to the point of collapse.

<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*, March 25, 1928.

## ORGANIZATION IV

### BOX OFFICES

**I**T is a commonplace of business that the commercial value of a thing depends on what you can get for it. It is a commonplace of customer psychology to pay no more than is necessary. In their relation to the theatre these two axioms have resulted on the one hand in the ticket speculator and on the other in the cut-rate dealer. Though they have developed with business logic out of the financial necessities of a great commercial enterprise, they have come to be serious influences which, unless they are checked, will never die out until the body upon which they are parasites dies from their depredations.

There are, I venture to guess, fully 50 per cent of the playgoers in every audience who buy tickets at places other than the box office, paying either more or less — depending upon whether the play is a hit or a failure — than the price stamped on the ticket stub. This situation came about in the most natural manner possible and it has its roots firmly embedded in the financial hazards of production. They exist, these twin evils, on the thoroughly human principle that people will pay anything for what they want and as little as possible for what they are not especially interested in. Both of them stem from the unassailable fact that a play cannot, perhaps even does not, exist without an audience.

Unlike the old controversy in physics concerning whether sound does or does not exist when there is no ear to hear it,

drama permits of no such question: assuredly it does not exist except in the minds of its beholders. It is therefore the business of a producer of a show to assure himself of an audience and to get one, if necessary, at any reasonable cost. Hence, if he can buy an audience ready-made he is relieved at once of all his worries, and the temptation to do this has resulted in ticket agencies.

A reputable agency is a legitimate business performing a definite service for a definite fee, but it is open to disastrous variations.

A typical case, for instance, would be that of a manager putting into rehearsal a play which, let us suppose, is a good play, well cast and competently acted. For the purely routine artistic purpose of getting his play into the best possible condition he takes it at the conclusion of its rehearsals into tryout towns near New York for a period of, on an average, two weeks. While it is being thus whipped into shape it may be viewed by a representative of the accepted and legitimate agencies.

By the time of its opening night in New York, and on the basis of its reception by the audience, these agencies may buy a certain very large number of seats for a period of many weeks. In a sense they become thereby the underwriters of the manager on the one hand and of the audience on the other. They have invested a considerable sum of money in their judgment that the public will want this particular play. Assuming that they are right, they virtually supplant the box office, and if the play should develop into a hit they have what amounts to a virtual corner on the ticket market. Respectable agencies no longer take advantage of the situation, but they cannot control the repurchase of these tickets by speculators who proceed to run the prices to fantastic figures on the perfectly valid theory that



a certain wealthy section of the public wants what it wants when it wants it. Hence, if the judgment of these speculators is correct, everyone is happy except that enormous and usually silent section of the playgoing public which cannot understand why it is unable to buy tickets from the box office at the box office price.

The manager has sold his house and has the money for it. Agencies have turned over the tickets to satisfied customers at a decent fee for their services, and the speculators have reaped their harvest by taking advantage of those who are willing to be taken advantage of. It is a beatific condition suggesting that every party has bought what it wants and is satisfied with its purchase. The flaw in the situation is that one out of every four plays produced on Broadway is a success, and it is perfectly obvious from the foregoing that the system is tolerable only in the case of a success.

Proceeding with this same hypothetical play let us assume that the agencies felt it would be a success and bought their tickets accordingly. The manager has his money. His audience is underwritten and "he should worry." He has shifted his financial burdens upon the eager shoulders of a middleman who expects to make them pay.

In a certain number of cases — but a comparatively small number, since these specialists are very wise and very cagey — their judgment is wrong and they find themselves in possession of leased seats and no prospective tenants; in other words, the public does not want the show. Since they have already paid good money for the tickets they must find a market for them at any cost or lose their entire investment. They would naturally prefer to lose two dollars instead of three. So they unload their unsold tickets on a cut-rate agency.

This brings us to the other side of the picture, for the cut-rate agency is a welcome outlet, not only for the original agency which is stuck, but for those producers who have been unable to enlist the gracious support of the agency in the first place. These are by far the most numerous.

Such a manager — to change the picture a little — takes his play through the tryout towns and brings it into New York without much response. The agencies handle his tickets for him just as a big department store keeps all kinds of merchandise in stock. He may reach a considerable public through the box office, but the competition for audiences is extraordinarily keen at eight o'clock on any evening. He will, therefore, deal directly with a cut-rate agency, selling the tickets over the bargain counter at less than they are stamped for. In this way he may be able, with some luck, to get back a considerable part of his investment and provide himself at the same time with a marked-down audience.

In rare instances a play so marketed may develop sufficient patronage for the legitimate agencies to step in later and take a hand. The most famous case of such a stupendous climax is *Abie's Irish Rose*.

Both of these systems go back, of course, to the financial exigencies of high-pressure business. It is in their effect on the public, though, that they have done the greatest damage.

The growth of the cut-rate practice, for instance, can be gauged from the instance of the celebrated enterprise operated by Mr. Jos. LeBlang, beneath Gray's drugstore at the corner of Broadway and Forty-third Street. Mr. LeBlang has told me himself, and his story has been canonized I believe in the success-sainthood of the *American Magazine*, that he began business in a cubby-hole six feet wide on Sixth Avenue less than twenty years ago. It is not too much to say that he exercises now

one of the greatest possible influences both on the public and on the managers.

The effect of his business on the theatre is in no way a criticism of him or a reflection upon his business dealings. Personally, he seems to me to be a man of many admirable qualities with an abiding love for the theatre. He simply had the assurance and foresight to take advantage of a situation in the theatre which has given him tremendous influence over a large section of the public. His business has grown and expanded. His counters are thronged every evening in a frenzy of bargain hunters. He has, no doubt, placed good seats within the range of people who cannot afford the ordinary prices, and his business provided a modest competition with the great movie palaces. As a result, however, it is almost impossible to sell the gallery seats in any legitimate theatre, and while he may have improved the social status and the range of vision of his patrons by bringing them downstairs, the process may ultimately become harmful.

It is evidence, I think, of his essential interest in the theatre, and equal evidence of the blundering and often childlike tactics of the managers, that Mr. LeBlang has repeatedly proposed to operate for the general benefit of all theatres a consolidated public ticket office.

Even to mention this is usually enough to start a small war on Broadway, which is separated into several camps on what seems basically to be a most reasonable proposal. Managers merely disagree over the methods.

In the first place, big business everywhere has developed an almost fanatical regard for the alleged comfort and convenience of its dear public. Prosperous people of leisure want service and are usually willing to pay for it. It has become almost a profession in this country to give it to them. You can telephone

an agency and route yourself over the entire globe and know what time you are going to have breakfast in a certain hotel in Shanghai three months hence with no more effort than it requires to take the telephone receiver off its hook. You can push a button in a hotel and a tube of toothpaste almost automatically brushes your teeth; but if you want to buy a ticket to a New York theatre it would seem you have to do nearly everything except that ultimate futility of writing to your Congressman about it. Railroads, florists, steamship lines — in fact practically every public utility — make it easy for people to get what they want if they are willing to pay for it, but repeated efforts to make ticket-shopping easy on Broadway have resulted merely in more confusion and greater animosity.

It is an ordinary matter of common sense based on the impossibility of running from one box office to another between eight o'clock and eight-thirty in one evening.

To a disinterested observer who, before he was given tickets, used to wonder at the difficulty of buying them it does not seem unreasonable for the managers to set up somewhere in Times Square a consolidated theatre ticket office. They need sacrifice none of their cherished autonomy. I could imagine, for instance, the entire ground floor of the old Times Building occupied by small ticket booths which, if they did not actually sell the tickets, could phone the orders to the box office in the theatre and let the customer have the mental security of a complete transaction.

It seems so simple that its very statement is ridiculous, and yet I assure you that a proposal to bring the North Pole to Times Square or to convert the Einstein theory into a musical review would seem to the managers about as plausible.

They need forego none of the benefits of the legitimate agencies, since the better-class brokers have standing clients,

mostly with large accounts, who are willing to pay for the extra service and the assurance of preferred treatment.

To set up a consolidated ticket office would remove at once the enormous discrimination which the present "hit methods" work against shows which might find audiences and keep them at a fair profit to the people who are entitled to the profit, which is to say, the people who are the theatre: the authors, the actors, and the producers. There is no earthly reason why, with its already enormous and almost prohibitive expense, the theatre should assume the wholly gratuitous burden of maintaining parasites who might as well batten elsewhere for a change, or, better still, go on a protracted diet.

## COMPLICATIONS I

### MORALS

**N**O single thing is more widely blamed — and less actually responsible — for the precarious condition of the theatre than its morals. It is so easy for the unctuous to blame sin for anything that the charge becomes widespread in the complacency of those who make it without thinking. All of the forty-one maledictions of the righteous are hurled at the drama's reasonably innocent head and the causes of the situation are lost in the satisfaction of pasting on a label.

From pulpits, press, politicians, women's clubs, and even publicity-seeking managers themselves comes the recurrent outcry: The theatre is rotten! Cut it out!

It is, of course, no excuse to contend that sin is profitable and that immorality in the theatre is the necessary adjunct of a commercial concern, but it seems to me that a question of intent enters into the matter, and the intent, at least, if not the results of it, can be laid partly at the public's own doorstep.

There is no use in discussing the matter with fanatics. They have long been suspicious of the theatre. Their inheritance is easily traced some three hundred years back to what amounts to a magna charta of intolerance.

It is a statement so typical of the attitude of even present-day reformers that I quote part of a letter sent by the Lord Mayor and Alderman of London on July 28, 1597, to the Privy Council:



They are a special cause of corrupting the youth, containing nothing but unchaste matters, lascivious devices, shifts of cozenage and other lewd and ungodly practices, being so as that they impress the very quality and corruption of manners which they represent, contrary to the rules and art prescribed for the making of comedies, even among the heathen, who used them seldom and at certain set times, and not all the year long as our manner is.

But take the almost contemporary anathema hurled at his theatre by the pious Master Philip Stubbes in his *Anatomie of Abuses*:

If you will learn to murder, flay, kill, pick, steal, rob and rove; if you will learn to rebel against princes, to commit treasons, to consume treasures, to practice idleness, to sing and talk of love and venery; if you will learn to deride, scoff, mock and flout, to flutter and smooth; if you will learn to play the glutton and the drunkard, if you will learn to become proud, haughty and arrogant, and finally, if you will learn to contemn God and all His laws, to care neither for heaven nor hell, and to commit all kinds of sin and mischief you need go to no other school, for all these good examples may you see painted before your eyes in interludes and plays.

To Mr. Stubbes and his intellectual descendants there is no use talking. Censorship is simply another commandment from Sinai. They are unmoved alike by the history of their own activities and the reasonable distinctions between honest art and commercial filth. They are unmoved by the fact that people may be decent and not blind and they forget that their own orgiastic fulminations against the devil give him more of his due than the theatre has ever given him.

The point of interest in a survey of this sort is the suggestion of commercial mismanagement and almost incredible stupidity on the part of the managers, and it is to the discredit of the reformers that they play directly into the hands of the influences

they are trying to eradicate. They have done this, indeed, so long and so violently that a suspicious person observing their efforts over a long period of time has every right to question their motives and their sincerity and to wonder if they are not often prompted by the theatre's private vice of exhibitionism.

Perhaps their first concerted movement against the theatre in the United States on the grounds of immorality occurred in the historic case of *The Black Crook*. It was America's first leg show, though in spite of it the public seemed to remain in the chaste delusion that women floated gently on the air.

The English ballet had been imported for performances in the Academy of Music, but the Academy burned down, so they took refuge at Niblo's Garden with a manuscript of a spectacular play which until then had no accommodation for dancers. The management saw a great chance to make capital of the situation and persuaded the author, as so many authors have been persuaded since, to change his original play so that nothing was left but the title, handsomely populated by what turned out to be a riot.

When the ballet from London made its first appearance it [the theatre] was packed from pit to dome. Never before in this country had there been seen either scenery or costumes on such a scale of magnificence. But it was really a hundred girl dancers, all of whom wore the scantiest possible attire, which made the production a tremendous sensation and aroused a storm of controversy such as had never been known before in connection with the theatre. Preachers improved the opportunity offered by *The Black Crook* to denounce the stage and castigate its license, but this only served to increase the success of the show, which ran for sixteen consecutive months and took in through the box office for 475 performances more than \$1,100,000.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mary Caroline Crawford, *The Romance of the American Theatre* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1925), p. 446.

A contemporary <sup>2</sup> said of this event:

A woman who has not ability enough to rank as a passable walking lady in a good theatre at a salary of \$25 a week can strip herself almost naked and be thus qualified to go upon the stage of two-thirds of our theatres at a salary of \$100 and upwards. Clothed in the dress of an honest woman she is worth nothing to a manager. Stripped and naked as she dare — and it seems there is little left when so much is done — she becomes a prize for a manager who knows that crowds will rush to see her and who pays her a salary accordingly.

This earliest instance reveals perfectly two dangerous factors in the question of theatrical morality: the competition and copying among the managers and the very profitable curiosity of the public when it is aroused by threats of reform. The incident provides a perfect chart for the vicious circle. The manager produces a play, from whatever motive, which goes against the entrenched but not necessarily enlightened standards of public taste. Professional moralists make an issue of it and swell his box office to such enviable proportions that other managers immediately produce similar shows from much less worthy motives and you have, ready-made, what passes for a flood of immorality but which is actually and fundamentally a by-product of big business.

Our own recent history has demonstrated with fantastic embellishments the very deadly operation of this system. The contemporary theatre dedicated to realism in art raises, however, some very special problems and permits, I submit, some very special transgressions. Realists have the implied right to see the life they are interested in; and since life itself is so rich and so varied and incapable of compression within any one code of

<sup>2</sup> Olive Logan, *Apropos of Women and Theatres*, Carleton, Madison Square, 1870.

hidebound ethics, they are forever barking their shins against reformers who, hiding from life themselves, want to hide the theatre from it, too.

An intelligent case in point is *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. Its objectors overlooked the fact that it was a clean crusader on their own side, and devoted their energies to attacking a play about prostitution, instead of attacking prostitution itself. It is invariably the case that they never examine the intent, but fly into a rage over insignificant details. As Bernard Shaw pointed out with reason and force enough to silence any sincere but misguided censor, these people condone dances and their exhibition designed to arouse the lusts of the flesh, and forbid an honest dramatist warning them of the consequences thereof.

The recent history of this problem shows it still more involved and more wrong-mindedly ridiculous. Soon after the war the district attorney, proceeding under established statutes, prosecuted a play called *God of Vengeance*. Under a legal system which encourages tortuous and expensive delays in all branches of legal practice the play was permitted to continue for some time before numerous audiences assembled virtually by the district attorney himself.

This incident gave rise to the creation of what has gone down into history ignominiously as the play jury. Through some legerdemain the prosecutor, apparently without official warrant, transferred part of his authority to a group of laymen who, after a complaint was made, would view the suspected play and recommend for or against its prosecution. As any reasonable person could have foreseen, the practice lent itself immediately to the most despicable practices. Activities of the jury were ferreted out by the press agent, and the suspected play, before its guilt or innocence had been established, was permitted to languish in resplendent publicity on the front page of every

newspaper in New York. This system became simply the adjunct of a press agent and supplied high-pressure salesmanship to the marketing of supposedly forbidden fruit.

The responsible managers objected on the perfectly valid grounds that their rights were being invaded by irresponsible and unofficial methods. The more farsighted people of the theatre met together under the threat of a censorship bill in the state legislature and drafted a workable plan by which the theatre would attempt to censor itself from the inside. It was, of course, a sad commentary on the fact that the theatre had been invaded by irresponsible outsiders with no thought of the drama or the public or the actors, but with an eye solely to making as much money as possible out of an indecent and outrageous situation.

The plan to have the theatre censor itself was outlined by Winthrop Ames,<sup>3</sup> speaking for a committee of nine representing authors, actors, and producers. His review of the causes which led to such a proposal was illuminating and significant, coming as it did from a producer whose eminent position in the American theatre is one of unimpeachable artistic and managerial integrity. He said:

We are convinced that unless the theatre makes some move to stop the capitalization of indecency as a box office asset, an enraged public opinion will impose political censorship from Albany. The Greenburg bill, already introduced there, proposes to extend the present motion picture censorship to the stage.

Our committee — and in this I think it reflects not only the theatre but general liberal thought — regrets the need of any censorship at all. But “it is a condition, and not a theory, that confronts us.” Nobody likes to be vaccinated; we merely prefer it to smallpox.

<sup>3</sup> Address by Winthrop Ames before luncheon gathering of dramatic critics and editors in the Hotel Astor, February 17, 1927.



And the present condition is so ominous that immediate action seems necessary.

The theatre has been unusually — shall I say, outspoken? — during the current season, and the various reform bodies (who represent a large and influential section of the public) have groaned and grumbled audibly. But the now discarded play-jury plan closed one piece and expurgated several, and so served as a temporary safety valve.

But, perhaps encouraged by the leniency of this jury, several exceptionally odorous pieces have opened recently, and when a crowning horror<sup>4</sup> threatened to descend upon Broadway, that did throw the lighted match into the fireworks.

The reform organizations, Protestant, Catholic and Jewish, and all sorts of non-sectarian ladies' leagues and clean-play clubs, united. They struck at Albany; they struck very forcibly at City Hall. They demanded action in a shout that could not be disregarded.

Before our Committee first met the present police raid had already been planned, a move forced by the pressure of influential public sentiment.

As we were too late to avert police action we decided to defer putting forward any plan of our own until after the city's gesture had been made, for fear our scheme might be confused with it in the public mind.

We hoped that drastic action by the authorities might allay the keenness for censorship. Unfortunately, the opposite has come true. It has been proved again that, by injunction and legal delay, a play may be kept open and meantime advertised on front pages as endangering public morals.

The reform organizations are therefore more bent than ever upon political censorship; and we should be blind to underrate their influence, or to deny that they have a strong case.

It is unnecessary to explain to anybody here why no bill can be drawn at Albany setting up a political censorship over the New

<sup>4</sup> Presumably *The Drag*, a play dealing with homosexuality.



York stage without seriously hampering the artistic freedom and progress of the American theatre. New York creates plays for the rest of the country, and is no small market for England and the Continent. With all its faults this city is without doubt the dramatic capital of the world today.

The usual form of censorship for a producing centre like New York or London is to pass on plays in manuscript. The English censor works this way; and his has been as light-handed and progressive as any such type of control is likely to be. Yet the London stage is plainly stagnant in consequence. The most eminent British dramatists have joined again and again in protest, but (because England is England) in vain. For (to the grief of many reformers) "the world do move" and morality moves with it. Queen Victoria would have been shocked by many a subject that our daughters discuss with propriety.

The Greenburg bill provides for censoring in manuscript. It stipulates that all plays shall be passed upon by readers named by the Board of Education. Simple mathematics will demonstrate the practicability of that plan. All authors are apparently free to submit manuscripts, and no manager would accept a play till it had been passed. In the office of one producer alone four hundred plays were read last year, and his office is but one in fifty. Cut the total in two and still some ten thousand manuscripts a year must be considered — by whom? I can foresee such a play as *Broadway* being passed upon by the maiden aunt of some up-state politician, by a lady who may never have set foot upon the real Broadway in her life.

Censoring in manuscript is unwise for another reason. No play is really "born" till the public has reacted to it, and till its players have felt that reaction. I have seen audiences unearth double meanings to the utter amazement of the author and actors. And I have seen an audience do its own censoring very effectively by turning cold with disgust over some situation intended to allure.

Besides, a manuscript really tells very little of the final effect of a play. It can be altered unrecognizably by "business" or by the way in which it is acted.

In New York most plays are rewritten during rehearsals — sometimes up to the very afternoon before they are shown. And if the original manuscript has been sealed in Albany in advance the producer would have to postpone his opening (at great expense) till our maiden aunt, now half blind from reading countless third carbons, has scruntinized every new “if,” “and” and “but.”

But whether they pass on plays in script or in performance no official board of censors can avoid the main objection to political censorship. They must, and will inevitably, *set up a code of rules and precedents to govern their actions*. They will be paid to censor, and censor they must. The reform bodies will harry them on one side, the refractory author and producer on another. “What right,” Manager A will cry, “have you to pass Manager B’s play when you object to mine, which treats the same subject?” The only refuge is to rule out the subject altogether.

Now when we come to throttle the theatre with a set of blanket rules and precedents we know exactly what will happen. The censorship of the movies has taught us.”

After explaining some incident in movie censorship, Mr. Ames outlined the proposal of the committee, a proposal to set up a jury which would reflect contemporary public opinion and “yet act swiftly and without notoriety, and be able to enforce its decrees with authority and finality.”

The jury which we propose shall pass on a suspected play will consist of seven members. Two of these will be chosen from a panel chosen by the theatre, though they need not be engaged in any theatrical business. We merely ask that they shall be sympathetic with its wiser interests.

The remaining five members of the jury are to represent the public.

And, after long casting about to find some organized body capable of fairly and intelligently representing the public we decided upon the American Arbitration Association.

This jury would have viewed suspected plays, given the author or producer a hearing, with opportunity for defence, and then, after deliberation, made its decision to close or amend the play.

The force of the plan lay in its provision for summary closing under a joint agreement to which the actors, producer, and author subscribed before the play was given a certificate for rehearsal. Such certificate was merely to keep the play under control by the jury, and was to stipulate that the three parties would abide by the decision of the jury in case questions as to its decency arose.

Although this plan offered the same perils inherent in any plan of censorship, they were certainly reduced to a minimum, and it appeared from the popular support tendered that it had some likelihood of adoption. If it served some strategic purpose in diverting the lawmakers for awhile, it brought no lasting peace, and has since gone into the discard under the new padlock regulations.

This padlock law virtually deprives a play of its day in court. It strikes at a suspected drama through the cruel instrumentality of a theatrical landlord who has no interest in it whatever except in relation to the rent he may get for his theatre, and that is precisely the point on which he is bound to act. When he is given notice that a play is unsuitable he is obliged to evict it from his theatre or sustain, in cases of conviction, the staggering financial loss of having his property closed for a year.

It is scarcely necessary to point out the obvious evils of such a regulation. Our statutes against indecency are sufficiently broad to protect the public in case it ever needs actual protection — which I doubt — from flagrant indecency.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "The tendency would be for a censor to grow more and more stringent by his own decisions. He would be embarrassed by a foolish

Legal interference in the theatre has invariably made itself ridiculous. Aroused on one occasion to its well-known righteousness, Boston prohibited any performer in a play from appearing on the audience's side of the footlights. It seems the morals of Boston had been imperilled by the jaunty behavior of some chorus girls who romped about the aisles and made the officials suspect that such close contact was too much for Bostonian susceptibilities. So they interposed a legal barrier across the proscenium arch, and to their chargin found that the first production to fall under the axe was a Sunday school project,

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consistency and would always stand for his former rulings. A censor starts out with an idea of repression. His tendency is toward that, and not to yield the other way, so that he becomes more expert in refusing his sanction than in giving it.

"No one man could possibly act as censor for New York City, where about a hundred plays are being produced at a given time. There would have to be a board of censors; and the entire board would be no better than its weakest member. . . .

"The fact that a few plays have been closed in New York by the courts, if it indicates anything, indicates that sufficient machinery already exists to take care of undesirable conditions as they may arise. The theatre itself has coöperated in the appointment of a committee to submit plays to juries when complaints are made. If that plan failed at all, it failed through the failure of the city officials to coöperate with it. But that can be arranged. The value of it is that the highest kind of control you can have in our government is self-control, and they are rightly endeavoring to control the thing themselves.

"The drama is an art. As such its use is undeniably to stir the emotion. That a play is capable of stirring emotions is not sufficient justification for its presentation. The emotions may be constructive in their effect, or destructive; the urge may be toward or away from the animal in man. It is essential that the emotions to which the play appeals shall be those whose urge is to the benefit of our present civilization as we understand it." — AUGUST THOMAS, *Reviews of Reviews*, April, 1927.

the old morality play *Everyman*. Thus were their homes protected.

Several cities have regulations against the appearance of children on the stage. In New York they may appear only by specific license, and always of course under the supervision and control of the Gerry Society. Though the regulations are seldom made onerous, they have resulted at times in such ridiculous incidents as the refusal of the city to allow some very necessary children to appear on the Provincetown stage in the first act of *All God's Chillun's Got Wings*. And they almost deprived Mr. William L. Tilden of his co-star in his never-to-be-forgotten debut when he appeared to great advantage in support of a young man of twelve.

When Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird* played in Chicago, they provided the perfect climax for that anecdote of Charles II, who, becoming restless over a play, was informed by an anxious manager that the queen had not shaved. Since Chicago was obliged to use dwarfs, of which there is a large colony for just such emergencies, the manager of *Blue Bird* was told, on this unforgettable occasion, that the Unborn Children had not shaved.

The ideal theatre, of course, would be one in which the audience would be sufficiently enlightened to judge for itself between good and bad entertainment, and forget such things as good and bad morals. Until that millenium arrives, I confess there must be some instrument to prevent the complete debauchery of the drama, not the audiences, by wanton people whose scruples lie in the box office.

Since it is unwise to judge motives too severely in a complicated world, I cite *Pleasure Man* as an instance in which I think the police acted with decorous despatch. Its dealing with sexual pervers had about it none of the chaste and splendid tragedy



which Bourdet wrought so superbly into *The Captive*. If its motives were not unworthy, its manners most assuredly were.

The connection of morality with the economic system of the theatre should be plainly apparent. Playgoers who attend rotten shows are not necessarily leering rakehells out for an orgy. Some of them are, of course, as are for that matter some of the visitors to every art gallery and museum. Many of them, I believe, are inspired by the vagrant curiosity which inspires people to stand on the street curb watching a man cleaning windows in a skyscraper or gilding a cross on a church. It is no more nor less than that.

The unfortunate fact, however, is that essentially they are lured into the theatre under false pretenses. They go to see something for entertainment and discover usually that in a sad world immorality may be as dull as respectability. They are defrauded. They have, if you please, defrauded themselves; but the point is that they are discontented playgoers, and it is difficult to persuade a discontented playgoer to bite twice.

Consequently each agitation has filled many of the public with complete disgust and tempted them to turn back to the radio, or the movies, or lotto or tiddlywinks, and taken out of circulation the one element capable of saving the theatre from itself — an interested and solvent public.



## COMPLICATIONS II

### HITS

THE enormous costs of production and the huge guaranties exacted by the people who own and work in the theatre have brought about a condition in which a new play is either an immediate success or an overwhelming failure. A manager is obliged to make hay while the sun shines, and a desperate producer will go to almost any length to save the investment he has already made in a new play. If he is lucky, as we have seen from the discussion on ticket brokers, he will be underwritten by the agencies. If not, he is thrown upon his own resources to win the precarious approval of the playgoers.

In this situation critics have a wide influence, though it is an influence which is often ridiculously exaggerated and sometimes foolishly minimized. Producers themselves differ on the subject, and it seems to me that the only rational estimate is that newspaper reviews tend merely to speed up the operation of the theatrical fates. A majority verdict from the press is likely to result in an immediate judgment from the public affecting a new play one way or the other.

This is by no means always true, since there are enough exceptions on both sides to imperil any rule. There have been some instances—not many—in which the newspaper critics have been overruled in an adverse opinion and some plays have become financially successful after vigorous panning.

There is also the famous case of *Close Harmony*, which failed after two weeks at the Gayety Theatre in spite of spectacular applause from nearly every newspaper critic in New York.

Astute managers who know their business are capable of analyzing newspaper reports and estimating their business influence. Many well-established managers withdraw their plays immediately when the first day's business at the box office tends to support the attitude of the reviewers, preferring to save themselves the risk of probable losses. The late Henry Miller told me, for instance, after the opening of *The Man in Evening Clothes*, that even in the case of a play in which he himself had faith and which he believed might prove popular with the public it would take him at least six weeks to overcome an adverse press. Six weeks under the terrific expense of rent and salaries represents a staggering outlay for all except the most powerfully entrenched managers, and almost none of them will take the chance.

A famous exception, of course, and one that has enticed many foolish imitators to a disastrous failure is *Abie's Irish Rose*, though even it is not a perfect example. Contrary to the popular belief which has converted the facts into something of a legend, Miss Nichol's play was not universally panned. Indeed, it received a large percentage of excellent notices, and there was at least one very shrewd prediction, in the *New York Times*, that it would have a phenomenal run. Such were the uncertainties of the time, however, that for three weeks it hung in the balance. Without crediting her with miracles it is sufficient tribute, I think, to Miss Anne Nichols, the author and producer, to credit her with the faith to continue in the face of disheartening difficulties. At the end of three weeks the Broadway fates had begun to smile and they continued to smile until they became almost hysterical. But that is a dangerous precedent to follow.

Few plays are so soundly made or compounded of such obviously popular material as to warrant even a three weeks' risk.

The point of the latter discussion is that economic conditions in the theatre have forced upon playwrights and producers a wholly artificial set of standards. Aside from the fact that the hit system has destroyed our repertory to such an extent that even a serious manager like Walter Hampden was obliged in the midst of his repertory program to continue nearly a year with *Cyrano* because it proved fatally popular, aside from this it has deprived the theatre of the moderate success which might make moderate audiences moderately happy. Season after season we see pretty good plays with a limited appeal thrown overboard because our theatre has no place for limited appeal. I doubt if it would be humanly possible to fill all of the seventy first-class theatres in New York with satisfactory audiences if by some miraculous stroke it were possible to put in each one of them every night an absolutely sure-fire piece of popular entertainment. Thus it is plainly apparent that a group of playgoers living in or visiting the metropolitan district cannot support an institution for which it has neither the interest nor resources.

This difficulty has contributed heavily to the mediocrity in which our theatre now finds itself. Producing managers faced with the financial burdens and the necessity of catching a public and catching it quickly resort to every expedient to get the attention of the playgoers. They get a good play if possible, or a sensational play, and trim it tastefully with actors who may or may not be the proper actors for it, but who have, in the opinion of the manager, some lure for the public. This has brought managers into the competition, not of providing good entertainment, but of manufacturing successful enterprises. Not the least unfortunate effect is on the actors. The actor who is considered

partly responsible for the success of the piece develops a fantastic market value.

Mr. George C. Tyler, one of the most experienced and intelligent of our producers, complains, for instance, that this cutthroat competition for actors does not allow conscientious managers to develop dramatic talent. "Suppose," he says, "I take a boy who has never spoken a line on the stage but who seems to me to have some talent for it. I give him a part and pay him forty dollars a week. If I am right and his personality is effective some other manager will come along and say to him, 'I will pay you three hundred dollars a week.' Of course he accepts the offer — and who could refuse? But the result of that is, he does not learn even the rudiments of his profession. He does not have to learn. He can sell his personality and earn enough to be independent." He adds this statement which, coming from years of effort in the theatre by a shrewd appraiser of its conditions, is a staggering statement: "Out of 15,000 actors belonging to the Actors' Equity Association today, there is not a single extraordinary juvenile man or woman."

We have our theatre overlords to thank for this condition, though I suspect that they themselves will presently have to pay for it. For all of these somewhat miscellaneous elements total up to the fact that the intelligent playgoing public has learned to buy only what it knows is good. Intellectually it is a bad attitude for a public because it may frustrate a valuable beginner, but it does at least suggest, as another very sagacious manager, Mr. Winthrop Ames, points out, that "the theatre audience in New York has become wary of the mediocre play and simply will not go to see it." It shifts the burden partly on the playwrights, who are yet to be considered in this survey; but it also indicates, I think, that even good plays with their

potentially enormous profits can be found only in a theatre freed from the present onerous economic restrictions.

This pressure of finance, which, of course, could never be eliminated entirely from theatrical production — if anyone were foolish enough to think its total elimination would be beneficial — this financial pressure, I say, is bound to warp all except the firmest-minded manager. Since he is forced to consider the fate of his production he must meditate upon its chances of failure, so that the whole process veers in the direction of the box office. Comparatively few even of the better Broadway managers can or do put on a play simply and unaffectedly because they like it. Many of them, no doubt, have had plays which they would have liked to sponsor had they felt secure.

Hence, very rarely can these men who, let us say, are excellent judges of plays afford the luxury of producing a play for themselves, and it seems to me that that would be the ideal state of affairs in the best of all possible theatres.

A fair example which is happily removed from local personalities is afforded by the English war play, *Journey's End*, whose merits are such, I dare say, that any misgivings about its production could be reduced to the purely financial. Its spirit, its writing, and its theatrical effectiveness must be generally obvious, since it has appealed to hundreds of audiences in many cities. Yet when it was offered to a number of London managers they turned it down, presumably on the notion that the public would not support a war play.

Since the public makes up one-third of any play, and all of its profit, it would be humanly impossible to ignore it; but since, too, there is as yet no instrument for ascertaining what the public wants, the only decent alternative is to give it what the individual manager wishes.

If the stakes were not so high, first-class managers could play their prejudices to the utmost and our theatre would be a livelier and finer place. If he were not forced to appeal to people whose patronage means little to him, in support of a play designed for a limited public — in other words, if it were financially possible for a manager to play out his play before a moderate audience capable of appreciating it and understanding it — he could make the venture and let the hits take care of themselves, since a hit, in the judgment of a manager's truest conscience, may be the worst failure he ever produced.



## COMPLICATIONS III

### MOVIES

**M**ANY of the troubles of the theatre are blamed on the motion pictures, and for some twenty years the movies have been a convenient excuse for a situation in which they are only partially responsible. Possibly a healthy theatre would not have sustained such heavy losses from the unequal competition and could have held at least the better part of its public against the invasion of cheaper entertainment. That is impossible to ascertain now. The blunt fact is that as the movies progressed from the nickelodeons to commercial canonization in Broadway cathedrals the theatre drew back its far-flung empire and found itself hard put for a time to keep a foothold in New York.

With shrewd management and a single generalship the movies have out-manuevered the drama at every point, shifting with popular taste until they invaded the vaudeville theatres and served up to their clamorous public a little of everything.

There is no minimizing the effect of all this on the theatre. Considering its situation in New York for the moment and forgetting that for many years the movies completely usurped the road, it may be interesting to point out the fundamental difficulty of the matter. To quote Mr. George C. Tyler:

A producing manager has to compete not only with other producing managers but with such theaters as the Paramount or Roxy. Those huge auditoriums can hire a hundred musicians, a hundred players in tabloid or musical presentation, can offer a first run picture, can

throw in for good measure Harry Lauder or some other high-priced vaudeville artist, and still do it for a dollar a seat because they have such enormous capacity. What right have I to present an ordinary play across the street and charge three dollars? And yet I must charge three dollars because of my expenses. I get eight performances a week. They get seventeen or eighteen. I have small capacity; theirs is enormous. I have to use the same number or more stage hands, and my fixed charges, such as advertising, are the same as theirs. My expenses are in proportion five times as heavy as theirs.

He would be a pessimist indeed who could imagine that the movies will ever completely supplant the spoken drama. The warmth and color and vitality of the theatre at its best can have no competition among people who appreciate it and who will go on loving it. The movies quite obviously have taken from the theatre audiences the people who had no other place to go but whose fondness for the theatre was so slight that they could be easily satisfied by the shadow of it. This tendency, after a period of barren and disappointing years, may ultimately work a great benefit to the stage. One can hope, at least, that by removing the casual playgoers from the audience the drama may find again a sensitive and intelligent public which will support it with its old devotion.

For the audience, aside from its financial status, as backer, holds the deepest possible influence. Probably the theatre, at a given moment, is never any greater than its playgoers. All of us have sat among detached people who have no feeling for the theatre and seen them curtly stare a play to death. Their disinterestedness may range from the icy snobbery of a Theatre Guild first night, which can be on occasion the most automatic of refrigerators, to the indifference of inadvertent playgoers who may have started out to see a movie or a musical show and wound up, through the devious machinations of the cut-rate

agencies, at a play that was never built for their mental limitations. Perhaps actors could speak more feelingly than a critic can on the outrages they and their authors suffer at the hands of movie-minded playgoers. Such spectators may choke a play to death or warp it grotesquely to the pattern of their own feeble understanding. A famous instance was *Desire Under the Elms*. After the reformers had done their dirty work and apprised the public of the fact that an essentially decent play was subject to prurient misconstruction, the theatre where it was playing became infested with people who should have been psycho-analyzed and refused admission at the box office. They laughed and by their own wretched conduct converted O'Neill's tragedy into a scandalous comedy hit. So great was their boisterous delight that it was almost impossible to proceed with the play, and on one occasion in the Earl Carroll Theatre, Mr. Charles Ellis stepped to the footlights and threatened to discontinue the performance unless the audience behaved itself.

This is, of course, an extreme instance of what an audience, if it is the wrong audience, can do to a play; sometimes its mischief is far more subtle. The point is that there can be no more tragical misalliance than the right play with the wrong audience, and while I do not suggest that movie-goers are a separate race of human beings cooked up in the fleshpots of Hollywood, I do mean to say that their taste in entertainment renders them less ideal for intelligent playgoing than is safe for the theatre. Consequently, if they go over bodily and entirely to motion picture cathedrals their neglect of the theatre is in itself a tremendously helpful thing and one of the hopeful signs that the theatre will emerge from its difficulties and come upon greater glories among those who can understand and appreciate it.

How far this whole business is to be affected by the talking

pictures is peculiarly uncertain within the motion picture industry itself. Observers disagree, not only upon the effect the talkies may have upon the theatre, but upon their effect on the silent pictures. The first horrible squawks in the name of art from the hitherto peaceful precincts of the screen aroused the indulgent laughter an infant might evoke by its first eager gurgle. The derisive laughter was interrupted by rather coherent speech, since the objectors had forgotten that infantile gurgling came first with men who lived to say rather significant things later.

The perils of this complicated development have shaken the motion picture industry from top to bottom and the shaking has dislodged some of the most influential people connected with it.

At the same time skilful artists have been recruited from the stage and from the writing desks in an attempt to fit the talkies up with good dialogue and suitable voices for its utterance. When perfected they may be marvelous mechanically, and an altogether new thing wherein perhaps lies the salvation of both the stage and the old-fashioned silent picture.

For the movies have neglected their rightful field of pictures in action and surrendered the astonishing heritage of the graphic arts in making pale copies of dramatic plots. Some pictures, of course, were made which at least touched with imagination the capabilities of the screen as an actual pictorial medium in the sense that canvas and paint make a pictorial medium. Such fascinating productions as *Variety*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, and such visual poems as *Grass* and *The Covered Wagon* were leading definitely toward the achievement which is the rightful goal of motion pictures if they are to be pictures, and not plays. They were optical operas whose aesthetic appeal was directly and exclusively to the eye without

the artifice and elaborate plotting which drama entails when it appeals to more than one of the senses.

The talkies cut clean across that path of advancement and put the movies in a firmer position to compete with the theatre on the basis of actual plot.

But nothing, I venture to say, they can ever do in the way of dramatic dialogue and dramatic acting can ever supplant the actual three-dimensional art which can occur only on a platform in bodily relation to an audience.

Thus, it seems to me, the movie did not commit suicide, as Mr. Gilbert Seldes suggests in a very interesting study,<sup>1</sup> but instead, like an artistic amoeba, the industry is calmly split up into two parts. Hence I believe the line of demarcation between stage and screen, between screen and talkies, and between talkies and stage will be firmly drawn. Each will have its sphere — the stage, no doubt, a restricted sphere, but a more secure one than it has been able to maintain in the past twenty years of wrestling with a shadow.

It is possible, even in the present undeveloped state of the talking pictures, to achieve some definitions, and to point out limitations which will always restrain dialogue pictures from usurping the place of spoken drama.

Some clue to the nature of the illusion created on the screen through talkie methods may be found in the audience. Since the audience represents one-third of a dramatic fusion, its function as a barometer is clearly established. If the individuals who constitute a houseful of playgoers are not welded into mob reaction, something is plainly the matter with the material by which this ordinary theatrical miracle is attempted.

Talkie audiences do not seem to be actively enlisted in the events on the screen. Spectators remain isolated, conscious of

<sup>1</sup> *Harper's Magazine*, December, 1928.



themselves and of each other; at least I conclude so from audiences that I have seen.

Now the movies certainly are able to fuse an audience into a single element, are able, indeed, virtually to hypnotize the separate members of the audience through the peculiar effects of light and shadows.

But this quality of the movie is lost in dialogue pictures, and the ultimate barrenness of the medium is indicated, I believe, by the fact that the dramatic interest in speech is unable to supply it. It merely distracts from the fascination of appealing directly to the eye without compensating in any way for the loss of interest.

This apparent quibble goes directly to the heart of the talkies' failure to sustain drama, or to gather its spectators into the sweep of emotional momentum.

It indicates that the screen can never duplicate the line of observation, the single, unwavering beam of consciousness built up under ideal conditions between an audience and a group of players on a lighted platform. Call it illusion, mood, magic, what you will, it is a very tangible element—the most tangible element—in drama, the final synthesis, indeed, by which play, players, and playgoers participate in one aesthetic experience and evolve out of their combined efforts the ultimate power that is drama.

Essentially this is built up from the play, which sets the actors' relations to each other; by the players, who convey this relation to the audience; and by the audience, which, acted upon by both these elements, reacts upon both by supplying its own creative force of illusion.

Take as an example of this a scene which is so obviously dramatic in real life that it requires only the most sluggish spectator to make it dramatic: an ordinary courtroom. Here is



a scene suggesting at once the simple dramatic elements of conflict, menace, and suspense.

Usually such scenes are so hackneyed in the theatre that an amateur would scorn them as banal, yet in the talking pictures such a scene fails through what I believe is the essential and permanent limitation of the medium; that is, the characters do not emerge in conflict, and hence there is no suspense aroused in the only place where its arousing matters, in the audience.

Consider for a moment the method used in a courtroom scene in the talking pictures and contrast it with the methods of the stage. Here is a woman, say, on trial for her life; there another woman who wishes her convicted and who may be able to supply damaging evidence; while in another seat is the accused's husband, and around them all is the suspense of undecided events, the tugging and embracing element which works all of the characters into a fierce relationship out of which the audience evokes its own sense of drama.

In attempting to duplicate these qualities the talkies are obliged to show isolated notes, one at a time. Since they are not able, with present lenses, to coördinate all the elements into one scene of dramatic impact, the audience is supplied simply with facts which reach its mind, develop the story, but leave untouched the mainspring of the whole business, which is the imagination.

Even if the technique reaches mechanical perfection, so that all of the details and their relationships to each other can be shown on the screen at the same time, it seems that the result would be merely the ghost of a show, the pallid carbon copy of something which would remain the unvarying standard.

I go into the matter at this length, not to minimize the talkies, for it would be stupid and foolish not to accept them as an amazing addition to human expression, but simply in an effort to

indicate that the true interests of the theatre need have no fear from this competition, to proclaim, indeed, the faith that there will always be dramatists and actors who will find expression solely in the theatre, and consequently an audience—a better and finer and therefore smaller audience—which will never surrender its heritage of great traditions to the keeping of Eric Robot.

Since the foregoing was written Miss Theresa Helburn, executive director of the Theatre Guild, has published<sup>2</sup> some significant comments on the artist's relation to a mechanical medium which provides such an interesting angle of discussion that I take the liberty of appending her remarks:

But the real artist in the theatre is never, I believe, going to find full creative satisfaction in the movies. In the case of the playwright this is obvious; he becomes merely an adjunct, an adapter, a sublimated caption writer. But for the actor it is equally true. Sooner or later to the work of the genuine artist must come the rhythm of creation. Unless at some time he is possessed by his inspiration, instead of being in control of it, he will never know the real joy of his work, or achieve its best results. While the art of acting seems to be a synthetic art, the actor digging gradually deeper and deeper into the playwright's meaning, and adding layer by layer his interpretation—partly evolved from within, partly suggested by the actualities of playing—at some time during the course of production there must come into the rehearsals a mastery of all the technical elements, a merging of all details into a rhythmic whole which sweeps the actor along and creates for the first time the actual mood and tempo of the scene. To see a great actor in the grip of this inspiration is a fine experience, and to break upon it by a word or a motion is to bring down upon you, deservedly, the wrath of the gods. Now anyone who has ever seen a talkie on production will realize how impossible this smooth, curved line of inspiration is in the studio.

<sup>2</sup> *New Republic*, March 23, 1929.

Even when the mechanism is perfected it is difficult to see how a form that defies the logic of time or space, combining scenes in production for practical reasons, irrespective of their sequence in the story, can ever achieve a profoundly realized creation of character. For that reason I believe that though the fine actor may be tempted by money to forsake the theatre for the pictures temporarily, he will inevitably come back with more relief and keener desire. And each time he comes back he will, let us hope, find the theatre becoming a more satisfying place of refuge, clearer in its artistic motive, less cluttered by mediocrities.

## PERSONALITIES I

### PRODUCERS

**B**Y placing large fortunes in the hands of irresponsible people the war had a more devastating effect on the theatre after the armistice than it had during its actual disorganization incident to fighting. Until then the theatre had proceeded under the steady, if not always enlightened, management of producers who at least knew their business as a business, and often comprehended it as an art.

Year after year these same men offered a group of plays bearing the trademark of their approval, and, as in all established enterprises, the public could tell what was on the show counters by looking at the labels. There were, of course, speculative enterprises, but these were greatly in the minority. This situation was to have abrupt transition.

War fortunes, bootleggers and organized crime released upon society an element which ordinarily would have no connection with theatrical production. For such people, dabbling in the theatre soon provided obvious attractions. Its excitement, its personalities, its pseudo-aesthetic implications afforded this gentry a handsome field for self-aggrandizement. They stimulated the theatre to a sudden excess of speculation. They were the ready-made "angels" waiting to have their wings plucked and their halos discounted at twenty-four carats in the nearest available box office. Their eager and ingenuous thirst made a holiday for anyone who could get his hands on them.

Production of plays became, in many disgraceful incidents, a matter not so much of knowing the business as knowing the butter and egg men. Their interests were amazingly ingenuous. If their fondness was for an actress, she might persuade money into a worthless play in which she fancied herself — or perhaps it might be that of a boyhood friend who had written a play years before and had had it all this time, thank God, buried safely in the attic trunks. On the face of it, it may appear to be a beneficent situation. Many of us, and I shamefacedly include myself, felt that a theatre made readily accessible to untried playwrights might become a vastly stimulating theatre. It seemed probable that all this eager interest in production would bring to the stage dramas shunned by more hidebound managers.

Alas, this was a foolish dream, for the output of fly-by-night managers turned out, over a period of years, to be startlingly trivial. There were many exceptions, of course, and the exceptions are responsible for much of the mischief. Several shoestring productions made their sponsors enormously wealthy, and every incident of the sort lured perhaps ten others to abject failure. I do not use shoestring as a term of derision for decent and responsible poverty. The Theatre Guild had, I believe, approximately twenty-three dollars to spend on its production of *John Ferguson*. The successful results gave us a splendid institution, and probably no money in the theatre has ever been more wisely spent or with more far-reaching value.

To understand thoroughly the excitement of those days it must be remembered that the theatre was flourishing mightily. Broadway was awakening suddenly as a financial power in the international theatre, and its position and wealth brought to us the splendors of the world. Duse and Reinhardt came, and the Moscow Art Theatre, and Balieff, French companies and

Pirandello plays. Broadway emerged from an uncertain artistic cowpath to the eminence of an international *bourse*.

Newspapers had a great influence, and by more spirited journalistic methods of criticism created for themselves, if not for the theatre, a non-participating public. Some hint of the enormous increase may be gained from the fact that within ten years from 1917 production of plays on Broadway had almost doubled. During the same period the number of available first-class theatres increased about thirty per cent, so the situation was immediately afflicted with the speculative aspects of a theatre shortage. At one time a new play had virtually to bid for a house. And the economic status of shoestring producers was often imperilled by the enormous guaranties which real estate owners exacted of their tenants. That it is a necessary precaution is indicated by the estimate of a qualified observer that nearly one-fourth of the productions during a recent season were sponsored by men of no standing whatever. Of the fifty plays embraced in this estimate, less than three were successful, which is a staggering ratio of failure when we realize that the usual percentage of success is one out of four.

This same observer, writing anonymously,<sup>1</sup> relates some very interesting incidents as a sort of clinical history of incompetent production:

A fair sample of them was provided by the play which, on a preliminary stand in a New England town, found itself in difficulties on the Saturday night immediately preceding the New York opening. A deputy sheriff armed with a formidable looking legal document arrived at the theatre in search of the producer. The latter managed to get out of town only a step or two ahead of the bailiff, who thereupon proceeded to hold the scenery. Only a few hundred dollars were needed, and this the producer managed to scrape up in New

<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, February 10, 1929.



York, forwarding it Monday morning to his company manager, who had remained behind. The scenery was released, arriving here barely in time to be set up for the Monday night première. The play ran one week on Broadway.

Another play put on by a man who deserves to be described as a promoter rather than a producer, who entered the theatrical field without any experience whatsoever and without any qualification other than the ability to raise limited sums of money, had to close at a tryout station after one performance for lack of funds to continue. That one performance was given without a dress rehearsal; in fact the scenery did not arrive at the theatre until an hour before curtain time. Shortly before the performance was to begin the stage hands served notice they would not work the show unless payment were guaranteed in advance. After conference between producer and theatre management the latter agreed, inasmuch as there had been a good advance sale due to the presence of a popular star in the cast, to take the sum necessary to pay the scene shifters for one night out of the box office till. But the next night, for want of ready cash, the troupe disbanded. In this case the cast had agreed to waive the usual Equity bond, and so did not even receive the minimum two weeks' pay. Fortunately for the actors, they had wasted little time. It is customary to rehearse a dramatic play from three to four weeks, but this management, being thoroughly slipshod and in a great hurry, contented itself with nine days of rehearsing.

A musical comedy put on a few seasons ago by a youthful adventurer who, although penniless himself, had wealthy family connections, furnished a whole series of amusing incidents. It was an intimate production estimated to cost \$35,000, a small figure for a musical, but a lot of money if you haven't got it. This promoter, whom we shall call Mr. X, interested a number of his wealthy friends, all of whom assured him they would invest. Put me down for ten thousand, said one. I'll go along for five thousand, said another, until the entire amount was pledged — pledged verbally, that is.

Mr. X then went to his brother-in-law, who, although rich, had previously refused to invest, and showed him by some feat of legerde-

main unknown to sound finance that he would have the requisite sum shortly. Would he put up with Equity, temporarily of course, an \$8,000 bond so that rehearsals could be started? The brother-in-law obliged, but when Mr. X went to his friends to collect the pledges he found that each had an excuse and that not one penny of the verbal pledges was forthcoming. Meanwhile, the bond having been posted, the cast was rehearsing.

The first indication that all was not well came when certain trades men, angrily waving unhonored checks, dashed into the rehearsal hall looking for the producer. It then developed that the director, dance director, and agent were also carrying valueless checks and that for several days they had been unable to locate the whereabouts of the producer. A badly disorganized group of actors held a meeting to consider a walkout, but a representative of Equity advised them to carry on.

Two days later the producer turned up, issuing new checks, which, although skeptically received, proved this time to be good. Subsequently it was learned how Mr. X had raised the money. He had confessed frankly to his brother-in-law that his plans had miscarried; but, he explained, if the brother-in-law did not now finance him he would lose the \$8,000 bond. So the relative put up something like \$25,000 more to protect his original investment.

The play opened out of town following a wild scramble to get scenery and costumes ready after the delay caused by the issuance of the "rubber" checks, and played on the road for one inadequate week at a heavy loss. Then, despite its unreadiness for Manhattan showing, it was brought to Broadway, where it received notices that were just terrible and where it played to less than \$4,000 the first week. The producer kept the play running at that theatre for four weeks; then he decided the reason business was bad was because the theatre was located on a side street. Though it meant breaking his contract with the theatre which he had foolishly guaranteed a minimum of \$4,000 a week, he moved to a playhouse on Broadway, where he said the number of passers-by would be a factor in improving business, but where, despite this optimistic theory, receipts were no

better. Finally, after four weeks at the new stand, he closed the show with a total loss of \$80,000 as against the \$35,000 first estimated as the sum needed. All of the losses were borne by the brother-in-law, who, although highly successful, was not endowed with good judgment in the show business.

Mr. X's mistakes were unbelievably numerous, but his error in running eight weeks after bad notices and equally poor receipts is common to novices at producing — provided, that is, they have the money.

Mr. X's frantic attempts to save pieces of the wreckage brings us to the workings of the hit system, considered in another chapter.

But the results of Mr. X's adventure, and the efforts of others like him, cannot be easily discounted. Such worthless enterprises entail an enormous number of unfortunate consequences, not the least of which is their effect upon the playgoer.

Indiscriminate customers, lured by cut-rate tickets, spend money to see such things — spend it, of course, without thinking, and perhaps even without any dire rebellion against the trick that has been practised upon them. But they have been made suckers. The comparatively large number of pitifully inept productions means simply a large number of victims, and since they were thoughtless enough in the first place to attend such a play, they are more than likely to blame the theatre as a whole for their own gullibility, since essentially everyone judges the theatre by the dramas he sees therein. These disappointed individuals are inevitably driven off to other pastimes and lost out of the healthy circulation of audiences.

They are, naturally, the people who do not read reviews, who know nothing about the values of the theatre, and who are incapable of making any reasonable selection in entertainment. Unquestionably they are to be found in every theatre,

and as long as they are pleased and happy they provide it with money and audiences. But when they are imposed upon too often they stop going, since it is their unreasoning notion that if they saw a poor play last night, the theatrical Fates being what they are, they may see another poor one tonight, or next week. The fly-by-nighters have simply provided them with endless food on which to feed that prejudice, and the chances are, as we have seen, four to one that they are right. It is an unhealthy proportion. Even the shrewd may be caught on such odds.

One might say, disdainfully, that the theatre doesn't need these audiences; but it does, just as much as they want good entertainment. They are simply cajoled away from patronizing better shows by the deceptive promises, and prices, of these others.

Nor is that all of it. These flimsy promoters—one can scarcely insult their betters by calling them producers—work out the sleaziest possible production. Heaven alone knows where they get their manuscripts, unless from a correspondence school. They may hire a cast of tenth-rate actors, cook up some fourth-hand scenery, and then burst upon the world with a Broadway première in the presence of critics who, whatever their failings, are assiduous to the point of martyrdom in the performance of their duties. Next day the papers simply burgeon with a frolic from the thesaurus in a veritable festival of happy derision. The ensuing weekend reverberates with echoes of previously forgotten catcalls, and at best the following Saturday finds the theatre dark again, the actors jobless again, the manager reduced to his original hatband for an office, and the only permanent injury, save scars on the critical gentry, done to the innocent, the altogether sappily innocent, customers who might better have bought themselves \$1.65 worth of orange juice as

the proper medium for exercising their God-given faculties of selection in entertainment.

Instead of curtailing such productions, the decline of business has served simply to increase them. When theatres were at a premium, shoestring producers gambled heavily on success. In the absence of many great successes more theatres are available. Terms are made attractive, so that plays of incredible stupidity by utterly unknown authors are offered in first-class houses by managers who, artistically, have no business even in an automat. The more failures there are, the more shoestring productions, economic values being what they are; so that the whole wretched picture becomes a dizzying spectacle debauching the drama at any price. It is the ultimate point of "business is business" as applied to the presumably imperishable art of the theatre, and real estate *in excelsis*.

There is scant need for explaining that the whole is not to be judged by its worst element. There are enough reputable producers, fortunately, to provide an outlet for what is, on necessarily one-sided evidence, the best our playwrights have to offer—the best, at least, that our more traditional and right-wing dramatists have to offer. They make the solid bulk of successful production for the most part, and satisfy an enormous public. They know their business, and the best of them recognize it as an art. The others make the mischief, and the noise.



## PERSONALITIES II

### DRAMATISTS

**I**T is difficult to define the effect economic conditions in the theatre have had on our playwrights. The American theatre became a native theatre only recently; and though this is perhaps truer from the artistic than the economic point of view, it is at least an interesting sidelight on the present situation. For years our stage labored under European influences, or, more strictly speaking, English influences. Up to the time of the World War its most successful writers were derivative.

The influence of American entertainment abroad has greatly increased since then and has not always been welcome. St. John Ervine, discussing the English theatre after the war, points out that America merely supplied the demand for sensational entertainment. "I consider it to be one of the greatest grounds my country has for complaint against America," he said, "that the greatest part of that sensational entertainment was provided by the United States."

But something considerably more than sensationalism was developing in the American theatre and in the minds of American playwrights, and if England bought the lurid stuff it was because England preferred it. For the war forced upon American authors at least the glimmering of an international viewpoint, and an international viewpoint arouses an interest in one's self as well as in others.

Hence it is easy, after ten years, to suspect that the lightless



nights which left Broadway cheerless and disconsolate during the war presaged, for our playwrights at least, the dawn. Since then the overgrown lout which bestrode the theatrical horizon has come of age, or to the age of reason. Since then they have reared in that giddy parish a monument to somebody's bad taste which boasts with diverting vanity that it is at the crossroads of the world. It is the point of this argument that theatrically it might have been, ten years ago, the crossroads of the country fair, since the world at that moment on Broadway was something that lay suspiciously east of the Statue of Liberty. Times have changed, and Times Square along with them.

Until then New York was small time in the world theatre, and, though the theatrical capital of the Western Hemisphere, it was on the subway circuit of Europe's drama. There was seldom, then, the assumption of intellectual equality or the free exchange of currency in international drama.

The situation was one of simple importation, and from Barnum to Bernhardt the principle remained the same, with the theatre little more than a sideshow for the exhibition of alien freaks. The populace gaped in wonderment, and Barnum, as one of the first American sophisticates of the stage, was internationally minded enough to make Victoria laugh at General Tom Thumb, to realize, in fact, that even the Queen of England had been born in one of his famous minutes.

So that theatre flourished, but it flourished as a museum, with no stronger contact with American life than any other showcase of art. It was a long time before anything was exported to take its place with Barnum's solitary midget.

New York, doting always upon its theatre, came easily of course into authority. It had its managers of great skill and players of reputation both at home and abroad. It had its playwrights of ability and at least one of tremendous promise; but

their output revealed for the most part either shallow observation of native life or feeble imitation of foreign manners. Clyde Fitch alone, perhaps, reflected accurately the life and times around him, but his horizon was bounded rather definitely, and for enduring fame rather disastrously, by the drawing-room.

This does not imply that the plays of that day hold essentially any less merit as plays than their modern successors. It is too easy to suspect that a change in fashion is always for the better, and the good old days are seldom cherished until they are dimmed past recognition. It simply contends that the gap between that day and this represents something more meaningful than a change in fashion, or even a change in public taste. It represents definitely, I think, the emergence of the American theatre, or, more accurately, of the American dramatist as a self-conscious artist handling his own material in his own way and receiving for his work the recognition of his peers. He has for the first time in its existence claimed the New York stage for the author and reminded a wayward institution that needs reminding too often that the play, after all, is the thing. It is the plainest fact of its existence; for which reason, perhaps, it can be so blithely ignored.

No doubt the beginnings of this change preceded the war, and they would in normal course have come to a slow burgeoning without sudden stimulus. Men of a wider range of interest and greater culture were drifting into the theatre, and isolated events could have been detected beneath its complacently commercial surface. What was later to become the chief producing group of the world was struggling in a remote bandbox to stand on its own feet. Sooner or later that movement, or some similar one, would have set up the Theatre Guild. The war's immediate effect, I think, was to kill it, though it really only cut it down for a larger sprouting.

That upheaval suggested some of the snobbery of melting pots, for while Columbus demonstrated to Europe that the world was round, it took a war to demonstrate it to America. The point for the theatre, at least, is not that we found Europe, but that in doing so our theatre found itself.

Within ten years Broadway has earned some right to its dictatorship and provided a place for native playwrights who are not insular, or provincial, or even blatantly star-spangled; who, in so far as art has any national boundaries at all, happen to be American. Good or bad, they do at last spare us the imitation article. What follows hereafter on our stage is irrevocably our own.

Some causes of this mushroom activity were bound up inextricably with the condition described so loosely as the post-war state of mind, but the symptoms of that diverting ailment were so confused that a sharper diagnosis seems at this belated moment a risky and perhaps ridiculous task.

Our country appeared to be touched with a vague but pervasive madness, to be afflicted with an attitude of irresponsibility that was blamed for everything from crime waves to the length of flappers' skirts. A whole nation had undergone the convulsions of war, prohibition, and fantastic prosperity in so short a space that it was unsettled and unsettling. It was, said the magazinists, the jazz age; it was, said the churchmen, hell and the devil; it was, said the country, the life.

Beneath it all, probably, lay nothing more alarming than an exuberance of self-confidence, a sudden conviction or an indefinable feeling that life was a thing to be lived. That worldly notion is not uncommon after wars, which have a way of explaining tragically that life is too short. A wilful country is at least a personality that can be expressed, and the expression that America gave its emotions of the moment echoed, through its

artists, around the world. From the blatancy of the movies to the possibly more permanent influence on the theatre this wave of self-expression left its traces.

At first this new interest showed itself in purely foreign affairs of the stage. Long since Ellis Island of the arts, the Broadway theatre became a veritable league of dramatic nations. The insouciant impudence of Balieff and the abstruse profundities of Pirandello alike found ready welcome. Broadway saw everything and accepted everything. A whole school of Hungarian dramatists fell upon the town and peopled its theatres with creatures of bright decadence. What the theatre had in Russia, Germany, Italy, France and England was dumped helter-skelter on Manhattan's amusement doorstep, since, to put the matter bluntly, America could afford it. More pertinently, though, America liked it; liked indeed such diversities as Reinhardt and Stanislavsky and Duse, and evolved rapidly out of a tempest of production a range of taste and an excitement in drama that touched finally American writers who, seeing this sure expression of other countries, found in it the clues to their own.

It was a thorough, if somewhat compressed, course in what the world's theatre had to teach up to that moment. It was a postgraduate study in methods and technique and tastes, a sort of historical résumé for dramatic practitioners. It gave them honorable share in the future, and there are enough inheritors, at the moment, to claim appraisal.

As senior of our chief dramatists, O'Neill holds precedence by length of work, individual eminence, and the fact that he is virtually *sui generis*. A detached, unyielding artist, he might have existed as a solitary aspirant toward an American drama, with nothing to lean upon but himself. He might have done the same work and remained painfully unnoticed for longer

than he did, had not the impetus of his own creation and the unusual interest in the theatre after the war brought him into contact with a special, and then an increasingly wide, audience.

But his colleagues who came along so swiftly must have, in spite of irreconcilable differences, given him aid and comfort and the thought that more than one man was making an American drama come alive — pretending, for the sake of this argument, that any of them were actuated by such an absurd motive. The point of this minor renaissance is, as of that greater one, that isolated events presently coalesced and made a large and provocative movement of many actually unrelated parts.

Obviously drama tends to mature and take on meaning as its roots touch the life about it. Environment gives it strength and personality and marks it with strong native characteristics. It is significant that the American theatre, since the war, has become absorbingly occupied with strictly local themes, striking back into its own background and assuming the obligations of the purely domestic. Where Poe stood as almost the first international American writer now stand a respectable number of playwrights capable of interpreting America in its own terms.

From the tentative and rather bare-faced folk themes of *Rip Van Winkle* and *Lightnin'*, our writers for the stage have come finally into the honest stuff of *Porgy* and *They Knew What They Wanted*. It was, in a sense, slow coming, through all sorts of experimental half-condescending slumming in folklore, such as, for instance, the MacKaye plays of the Southern mountaineers; but the process developed presently into such authoritative works as *Sun Up*. And such glamorous failures as *Deep River* and *First Flight* at least savored of their material and failed with the integrity of honorable purpose.

It would be easy but tiresomely statistical to follow the course of these plays about native themes into and out of all



sorts of localities, showing all sorts of results. Their authors have trailed the contemporary subject everywhere, and in almost every mood, ranging from the exciting vigor of *Broadway* to the scalding burlesque of *Chicago*; from the shrewd transcripts of George Kelly's *Show-Off* and *Craig's Wife* to *The Potters* and *A Man's Man* and *Is Zat So* and *The Fall Guy*; from the extravagant Harlem of *Lulu Belle* to the quiet suburban heartbreak of *Close Harmony*.

Though only a step, it is a step which often means years of transition from the literal almost naïve use of material to an intellectual appraisal of it. It is a slow business; setting a comment beside a fact, an opinion against an observation. Older countries have taken generations of dramatists. War plays, for instance, which used to strut the stage in tinselled and swaggering romanticism will hereafter have to stare *What Price Glory* out of mocking countenance. It did at least take as affecting a play as *Journey's End* to do it.

But irony followed close behind the delvers into the American scene, for a group sprang up at once to pour vitriol on the native customs, to give the editorial accent to this new drama, and to make blistering fun of the recently excavated Americana. Such carbolic acid of human kindness as *Dulcy* and *To the Ladies* laid decent basis for the iconoclasts and bunk-detectors and heralded at a discreet distance the subtle mockeries of *White Wings*, the blunter savagery of *The Silver Cord* and the blistering fireworks of *The Front Page* and *The Royal Family*.

Since the modernists at the moment are the exponents almost exclusively of a theatre of opinion, they fall readily into the lively catalogue of scoffers and attention-callers and at least do their katzenjammer best to make it livelier with brickbats and dynamite. *Processional* led a minor group of insurrectionists



into the uproar of revolt, but the very echoes of that brawny and irritating drama still sound louder than the newest shouts. From his own and others' plays that followed, it was apparent that John Howard Lawson had started something which neither he nor his colleagues in rebellion, even in their own theatre, have been able, so far, to finish. The much-maligned and misunderstood "him" of e. e. cummings, belongs almost alone in a larger and more enduring category.

Between the extremes, between the lush sweetness of homespun drama and the polished decadence of the ultra urban, there are many plays deserving their own niches by right of conquest, plays that have put a stamp of poetry or sophistication upon the contemporary and given that stamp the dignity of a trade mark. Witness the sheer power of *Street Scene*, the touching beauty of *Saturday's Children*, the suavity of *The Firebrand*, *The Second Man*, *Paris Bound*, *Holiday*, and call it stuff that can stand on its own feet in the world theatre, drama that speaks with an American accent but with more than parochial meaning.

Such sudden leaps and bounds entail many errors and serious faults. The process has made facility a great virtue and depth exceedingly rare. There is about much of the material the suggestion of second-hand observation, of hurried workmanship, clever enough, to be sure, but lacking somehow the firmer qualities of enduring drama. The tendency, indeed, has become so acute as to lead dangerously close to the headlines, so that yesterday's news is only too often the half-baked play of tonight. But it gives the theatre life and vitality and at least the merit of being up with the times, for whatever their defects on the stage, the times and the places are, at last, our own.

This is all very reassuring, but the outlook is not entirely rosy, since the theatre, as it is at present constituted, does not

yet command the interest and attention of the men it should enlist. For every play of average intelligence on Broadway there are perhaps ten novels of equal or greater quality at the publishers. The younger men who are writing these books are distrustful of the stage, and in the past they have had reason to be.

Not all the reasons have been removed, but it is decidedly easier for a beginner to get his work read than it has ever been, and this ought to be the guaranty of fresh blood. At one time during a recent season nearly two-thirds of the successful plays on Broadway were first plays. It was the peak of production competition, the forced flowering of fairly good dramas under great economic pressure from a public which seemed, momentarily, to have gone mad about the theatre.

At the moment of writing the score is far on the other side. There is no immediate insistence on native themes, and many of the men mentioned in this chapter are not in active participation. Some of them are, perhaps, languishing upon their royalties, while others have yielded to the lure of film production, along with actors and directors.

It is significant that, with one or two half-hearted exceptions, no man of talent has appeared during the past season even with promises of future value. It seems equally significant, though admittedly less demonstrable, that most of the young men who study the theatre at college, with intent to make it their work, expect to become actors, or, by some magical transformation understood apparently only in their own minds, become critics or directors overnight. In contacts through lectures and letters and the usual June jaunts to newspaper offices from campuses in the East, I have heard very few of these neophytes express any intention of writing for the theatre.

For all the warnings to the contrary and all the hideous examples about them, they still seem to feel the need for a Broad-

way mind. They grope for the slick ease of a method they see about them, instead of trying to find their own.

This is set down in no deluded belief that by crying in the wilderness we can evoke, as if by magic, a race of Tchekovs, or summon a family of Medicis for the Volstead Renaissance. I am perfectly aware of the fact that the most helpful conditions possible may produce nothing in the way of greatness. It can't be stimulated by all the incantations in the world.

But it is fair to submit that many conditions in the theatre have tended to discourage men who might devote their talents to playwriting, and that in the gradual reorganization now being forced economically on the theatre these conditions are likely to be changed. Plainly men of imaginative resource and some ability would be willing to work in a theatre that commanded the respect and attention of intelligent audiences; and with fewer theatres and better audiences at their disposal, the surviving managers, constituting no doubt the best minds in the drama, will be in a position to foster our playwrights and help them to a newer and firmer eminence.

## BY PRODUCTS

### LITTLE THEATRES

**I**T is, perhaps, not too early in the fifteen years of their flourishing and pampered lifetime, to appraise the work of the little theatres. Great things were promised for them, and great things they may yet perform, but the simple truth seems to be that so far they have done nothing except demonstrate anew that America's outstanding contribution to the art of the theatre is to organize it — to organize it almost to death.

In the first enthusiastic epidemic of community drama clubs we were promised a cure for the ailments which Broadway was supposed to have inflicted upon dramatic art. These little theatres, we were told, would cherish the drama in remote hamlets and cause it to burgeon in distant cities. They were to decentralize the control of New York; they were to foster local artists, and they were to bring about a veritable renaissance of culture which would recreate the drama from one end of the United States to the other.

That happy vision was embroidered with all the rapt promises of urgent crusaders. There was about it the might of selfless gallantry, the girding up of loins to do battle with a monster which, in the fumes of this overpowering dream, was shown to be strangling the life out of the American theatre.

Yet it is as plain as any row of statistics can make it that the little theatres have so far done nothing of the sort. With

three or four distinguished exceptions the thousand or so of them seem to have forgotten all about this hearty redemption and it is obvious that whatever is new and vital and promising in the American theatre at this moment — as little as it is — lies completely within the commercial theatre. The little theatres, instead of feeding Broadway, as they seemed to intend, are content to feed upon it. They have contributed almost nothing creatively to what, in spite of its virtual non-existence, we are obliged to term a national drama.

This state of affairs would be less alarming were it not for the fact that the mentors of the little theatre movement suffer apparently from astigmatism, and are unable to see it at all. Almost no commentator on the work of community drama clubs is willing to admit that they have no influence whatever, and our magazines and newspapers sprout, in season and out, with the rosy opinions of those who still think that the little theatres are not only the saviors of art, but that they have, by some miracle not yet explained, already saved it.

Witness the statement in a recent issue of an influential magazine of the theatre <sup>1</sup> that "when long runs were being a curse to our stage, and the Repertory Theatre which had flourished in the days of Booth and Daly was stoney dead, the Little Theatre idea came like a fresh wind and by its example put new life into Broadway."

As far as this supposed effect on long runs is concerned we have longer runs than we ever had, and this same commentator admits in the next breath that the only repertory theatre we have which comes within the European meaning of the term is the Civic Repertory Theatre. As a matter of fact long runs have interfered with the semi-repertory idea of the Theatre

<sup>1</sup> Roland Holt, "The Big Little Theatres," *Theatre Guild Magazine*, May, 1929.

Guild and have twice interrupted repertory schedules proposed by Walter Hampden and the Neighborhood Playhouse, with the former in the case of *Cyrano* and with the latter in the case of *The Dybbuk*. This seems to leave the fresh wind blowing pretty much where it listeth, and Miss LeGallienne the only occupant of an important field, not, I venture to say, because of anything the little theatres did, but solely because she has gathered about her enterprise a sustaining audience interested in modern classics.

Another statement fairly typical of this exuberant blindness to the facts suggests also some very interesting sidelights on the initial organization of these community theatres:

While New York commercial theatrical producers' and actors' organizations are holding conferences to determine what shall be done to keep the drama from becoming extinct, the non-commercial theatre is marching on happily, planting the flag of the drama in every community. While the commercial theatre blames its growing extinction on the encroachment of the movies, the non-commercial theatre is quietly thriving in spite of the movies.

To appreciate just what the little theatre movement is doing for the drama, it is necessary to understand what little theatre organization means. Take a typical instance in one of the larger cities. A group of drama enthusiasts from a play reading circle. The next step is to organize a little theatre. The coöperation of the mayor, the chamber of commerce, the newspapers, women's and men's clubs and civic organizations is enlisted. The newspapers coöperate by announcing that prominent organizations have combined to organize a little theatre and that all interested in the movement are invited to attend a public meeting. This call to the colors of the drama is directed to those who would act, design, build, and paint scenery, design and sew costumes; to electricians and carpenters, musicians to form an orchestra, business men to take care of the business side of things, publicity workers, typists, poster artists and all kinds of helpers, all to



work without pay. And right here let us say that no snobs are wanted in the little theatre.

Committees are formed, including a membership committee. The membership committee appoints individuals to sell memberships, by letter and personal contact. Membership subscriptions are usually \$5 and \$10, \$5 for active members (players and workers), and \$10 for associate members (the audience). It is no unusual thing for the mayor to issue a public proclamation designating little theatre week as the first step of the drive for members.<sup>1</sup>

All of these are the usual symptoms of community effort, whether in raising war funds, knitting stockings, or arranging a picnic. For all the self-conscious and slightly artificial taint about it, the method may be accepted as the standard twentieth century means of getting up civic steam. Without inquiring into either the motives or the abilities of the people who go about planting the flags of dramatic salvation, this study seeks merely to examine the results of their efforts, the tangible things which may be separated from their fulsome oratory and set down on the credit side as definite accomplishments in the field of the American theatre.

Numerically the strength of the little theatres is astounding. A recent tabulation indicates that there are at least 1,500 of them in the United States, and of this number a few have achieved considerable distinction for their productions, such, for example, as the Carolina Playmakers at Chapel Hill, the Washington Square Players of New York University, the Pasadena Community Playhouse, the Dallas Little Theatre, the Community Playhouse in Omaha, and the little playhouses in Cleveland, Baltimore and New Orleans. Professor Baker's workshop at Yale probably should be included, though the Providence Players and the New York Amateur Comedy

<sup>1</sup> Elita Miller Lenz, *New York World*, May 5, 1929.

Club both existed before the general movement began, and hence exist more properly as individual dramatic entities.

In spite of the fact that the university groups are invariably included in the list of important little theatres to bolster up the statistics, there is plainly little excuse for putting them in. They belong in the curricular activities of the colleges, and they are supported either by endowment or at least partially by university funds. They may, however, be considered as belonging to the movement since their aims are essentially the aims of the little theatres.

There is no use winking the fact that these theatres have undertaken a wide range of production, and from all accounts have carried out their plans with great artistic success. The Community Playhouse at Pasadena produced O'Neill's enormously difficult *Lazarus Laughed*, a project which stumped two New York producers; and other plays given in various houses over the country included the same author's *Anna Christie*, *They Knew What They Wanted*, *Liliom*, *The Queen's Husband*, *Redemption*, *A Doll's House*, *Candida*, *John Ferguson*, and *The Swan*.

Indeed, it may be asserted that the little theatres of the United States have carried to remote stages plays by most of the important dramatists. A tabulated list, for which I am indebted to a symposium conducted by the *Theatre Arts Monthly*, indicates a truly amazing number of Shakespearean productions.

Nor can these productions be dismissed with a patronizing and professional shrug. Anyone who has viewed the work of the twenty little theatre companies which compete each year in Walter Hartwig's admirable tournament can attest the very high degree of skill with which most of the plays are mounted and acted.

This criticism goes deeper into what seems to be the shortcomings of the movement, a deficiency which is so fundamental that one can only assume that the little theatres have changed their original project and now proceed in a totally different direction. For it must be understood that they accepted the implication of "torchbearers." They were presumably leading the American theatre somewhere to some private Valhalla where art would flourish, and commercialism droop its wicked head. Such professional observers as Augustus Thomas, in fact, hailed them as "bone and sinew" of the national theatre, and that cagiest of prophets, *Variety*, the showman's bible, announced with some alarm, apparently, that the little theatres would have "the 'legit' by the throat ten years from now." The ten years have passed, and at most the little theatres seem to have the "legit" by its coat-tails.

The measure of their failure is made plainer by the fact that during the past ten years Broadway has devoted increasing attention to folk themes in drama. Putting aside for the moment such obviously urban plays as *Broadway*, *Is Zat So*, *Chicago* and *Lucky Sam McCarver*, which would naturally evolve to reflect life in cities, our recent drama has been rich in native material. Yet none of them sought the local outlets which any little theatre of initiative would provide and must provide if the community dramas are to do anything more pertinent than echo the voice of Times Square.

*Porgy* came out of the South and found production with the Theatre Guild. *This Fine Pretty World* was done by the Neighborhood Playhouse in Grand Street, a thousand miles from its locale. *Sun Up* had the same story, and so, too, did *The Dunce Boy* and *The Shame Woman*. The list is as long as the list of plays dealing with native material. Surely such a promis-

ing play as *The Earth Between* deserved a hearing in its native Kansas before having the precarious benefits of New York presentation.

The utter blandness with which our little theatres now ape the model they so recently and so loftily despised is shown in the statement by Mr. Barrett H. Clark that he tried unsuccessfully to sell Paul Green's *In Abraham's Bosom* to various little theatres, but that after it won the Pulitzer Prize in its New York production he was swamped with requests for the rights.

"If I had a really good experimental play,"<sup>1</sup> he is quoted as saying, "I would try to sell it everywhere on Broadway before I sent it out to the little theatres."

A similar expression was made at the Yale conference by the manager of a little theatre in Maine who said that the first question her clientèle asked of a play which she suggested producing was "Is it a Broadway success?" If it was, they wanted it; if not, they didn't.<sup>2</sup>

Since, then, it is apparent that the little theatres have thus far neglected their proclaimed function of standardbearing and have become, more or less unconsciously, adherents of the old order and parts of the organized theatre, their utility may be examined apart from their professed aims, for they have of course a very definite value in the life of the communities where they flourish, and do stimulate an important interest in the drama. No special magic lies in the word "amateur" unless it betokens a lover of art, and the mere fact that the little theatres operate without salaries can have, ultimately, nothing to do with their function in relation to the theatre in general, since a theatre which is unable to support itself usually is not

<sup>1</sup> *Theatre Arts Monthly*, March, 1929, p. 310.

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, February 13, 1927.

worth supporting. Subsidy in such cases may be merely the embalming fluid for creative effort.

Doubtless some of these theatres may yet prove the mouthpiece for an exigent dramatist, newly risen in a remote corner of the country, but one scarcely looks for the dauntless experimenters who gave Tchekhov to the theatre, or for that intuition which could see splendour in *Journey's End* when commercial managers were blind to it in London.

If each little theatre in a large city bent its energies upon a local writer, some, here and there, might ultimately become the instruments of developing playwrights, men who could speak in the local idiom, and lend color and variety to a larger national theatre, since it would be a theatre not funnelled through Broadway, but springing from every quarter. Such utopian projects of course overlook the fact that it is more profitable for a beginner to try his wares on Broadway; but it is certainly to the discredit of the smaller theatres throughout the country that New York, even with its mass of unproduced plays, still provides greater opportunities for the beginner than does his own province.

Considered as an adjunct of Broadway, however, these little theatres are performing an increasingly important work by reviving the interest of smaller communities in the drama, and so enlisting local support that visiting players are seldom in danger of empty houses.

At Yale's conference on the drama in 1927 Mr. Brock Pemberton suggested that this might turn out to be the highest function of the little theatres, since he felt that they would prove increasingly useful "by keeping alive the public's interest in the spoken drama until such time as the professional theatre is ready and worthy to rescue the road from the movies with



their tasteless foolish photoplays, their stereotyped programmes, served in their strawberry ice cream soda auditoriums."

The intimation that they could then be discarded was overlooked by Professor B. Iden Payne, of the drama department of Carnegie Institute, who, during the same discussion, clung to the original ideals of the little theatres. He pointed out that many of them employ professional directors, some even professional actors, and on this basis proposed that the little theatres resume the once widespread practice, in vogue until it was crushed by the booking syndicates, of inviting traveling stars to play with various local companies. In this way, he contended, amateurs and professionals would be united in the best possible system and under the most favourable auspices.

Professor Somerville for many years has tried this out with his Washington Square Players at New York University, but of course the results in New York could not be typical, since any producing unit is merely another competitive group working against the overwhelming advantages of Broadway.

Even so, such a system would serve to draw the little theatres into closer contact with the organized commercial theatre, and might even subject them to the restrictions of unions in the use of Equity players.

Hence the work of the little theatres seems to lie between these two proposals, and to partake of both. They may help in reviving the road for the professional theatre by representing the opinion of the road public. One factor which helped to undermine the road was the failure of producers, in the exigencies of booking warfare, increasing railroad costs, and movie competition, to pay very much attention to what the road public wanted. Here is the ballot box by which the professional theatre can measure its support in advance; here is



the apparatus all ready by which the touring companies can gauge public opinion before, and not after, an engagement.

Some such use has been made of the community drama clubs by the astute Theatre Guild in the tours of its road companies. The success of the scheme indicates the value of the little theatre organization, and suggests, indeed, that it could be profitably enlarged to operate through a more central board: to become, in fact, a sort of ex-officio consultant of Broadway managers, helping them to weed out plays for touring purposes, and thus carry drama back to its sources.

In some such fashion they may ultimately take their proper share in moulding the theatre nearer their original intention. They may reach by a detour the goal for which they set out fifteen years ago upon a straight and shiny path. Perhaps they are not to be severely criticized for changing the course, as long as the vicissitudes of a movement so loosely organized are understood and allowed for. Certainly they may prove eventually better off for this contact with the professional theatre, and more profoundly useful as disseminators, not creators, in bringing American drama to a wider public and taking thereby an active part, not in copying Broadway, but in helping Broadway to copy American life.















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